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### Art for Everyone? Mush, Multiculturalism, and the Prismatic Arts Festival

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Article abstract

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# Art for Everyone? Mush, Multiculturalism, and the Prismatic Arts Festival

BRITTANY KRAUS<sup>1</sup>

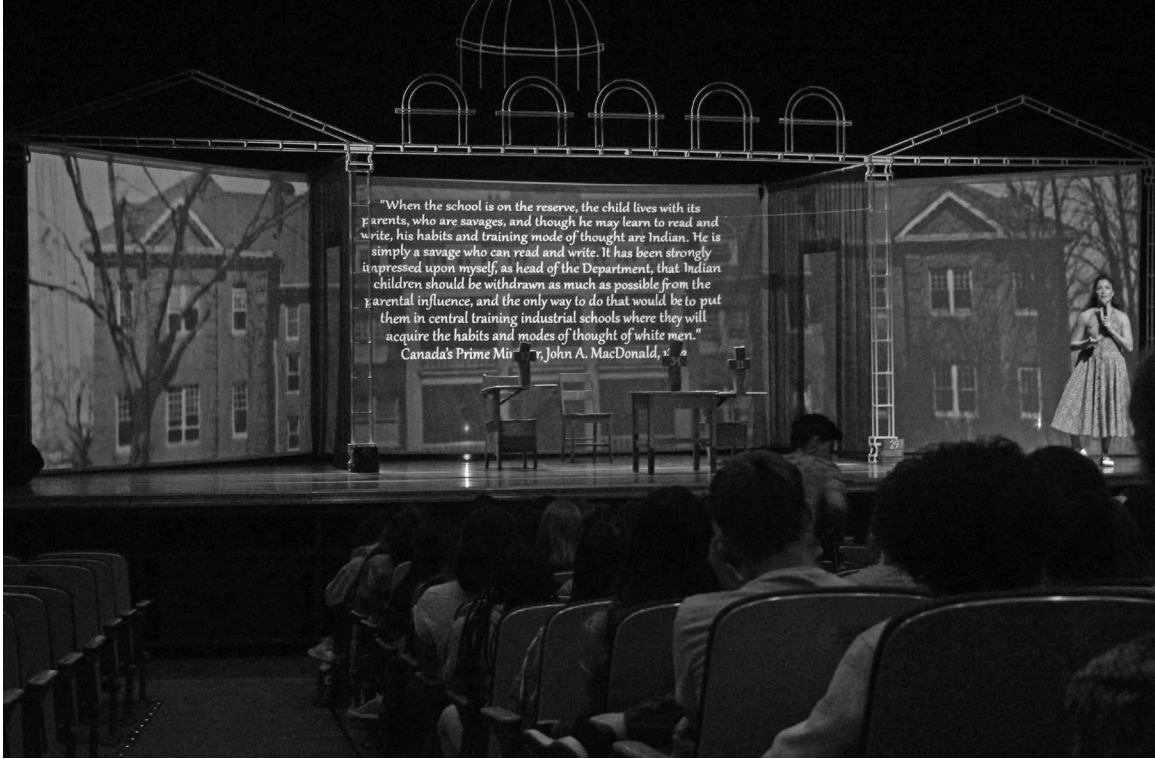
Founded in 2008 by Shahin Sayadi and Maggie Stewart, the Prismatic Arts Festival is a Halifax-based multidisciplinary arts festival that features the work of Indigenous and culturally diverse artists. This article examines the development of the Prismatic Arts Festival and the ways in which the festival has sought to negotiate, challenge, and transform Halifax's artistic landscape by creating a model that is locally-grounded, nationally-networked, and fundamentally devoted to advancing the careers and profiles of Indigenous and culturally diverse artists in Nova Scotia and across Canada both within and outside of mainstream performance cultures. As the festival recently celebrated its tenth anniversary, this article traces the history of the Prismatic Arts Festival, its struggles and successes, and the complex negotiations the festival has made and continues to make in order to move toward a future of Canadian theatre in which cultural diversity and inclusivity are the norm, rather than the exception.

*Fondé en 2008 par Shahin Sayadi et Maggie Stewart, Prismatic est un festival des arts multidisciplinaire basé à Halifax qui met de l'avant des œuvres d'artistes autochtones et d'origines culturelles diverses. Dans cet article, Brittany Kraus se penche sur l'évolution de l'événement et sur les stratégies employées par ses organisateurs pour négocier, mettre à défi et transformer le paysage artistique d'Halifax. Le festival, qui vient de souligner ses dix ans, puise à la fois dans la communauté locale et ses réseaux nationaux et se voue à l'avancement des artistes autochtones et d'origines culturelles diverses qui exercent leur métier en Nouvelle-Écosse et un peu partout au Canada, tant à l'intérieur qu'en marge des cultures de performance grand public. Kraus retrace l'histoire de ce rassemblement, relate ses luttes et ses victoires et expose les négociations complexes auxquelles les organisateurs ont dû se livrer au fil des années afin que la diversité culturelle et l'inclusion deviennent la norme plutôt que l'exception dans le milieu théâtral au Canada.*



## A Premiere at Prismatic

On September 14, 2018, Santee Smith's *The Mush Hole: Truth, Acknowledgment, Resilience* premiered at the Spatz Theatre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, as part of the tenth anniversary of the Prismatic Arts Festival. *The Mush Hole* is a dance-theatre production based on the stories and experiences of Mohawk Institute residential school survivors, and was developed by



***The Mush Hole*, Kaha:wi Dance Theatre Production (2018). Santee Smith (Artistic Director), Opening Remarks. Photo provided by: The Prismatic Arts Festival.**

Smith—an award-winning multi-disciplinary artist, dancer, producer and choreographer from the Kahnnyen’kehàka (Mohawk) Nation, as well as the founding Artistic Director of Kaha:wi Dance Theatre—in close connection with residential school Survivors, building upon their stories, writings, experiences and collaborative input. Indeed, the creation of *The Mush Hole* began within the walls and on the grounds of the former Mohawk Institute,<sup>2</sup> the oldest residential school in Canada and the prototype for every residential school that followed (*Mush Hole*, Playbill). Located in Brantford, Ontario, the Mohawk Institute operated from 1828-1970 as a boarding school for First Nations children from Six Nations and Indigenous communities throughout Ontario and Quebec. The students and members of the Six Nations community nicknamed the school “The Mush Hole” due to the fact that mush—a gelatinous dish of cornmeal pudding boiled in water or milk—was the staple food at the school, often served to the children spoiled and wormy. While the Institute was surrounded by an apple orchard, the children, starving and malnourished, were forbidden to eat the apples, and would face severe punishments of strappings and beatings “on the body’s most sensitive parts” (*Mush Hole*, Playbill) if they disobeyed. The apple is a prominent symbol throughout *The Mush Hole* for the deprivation, degradation, and suffering the Survivors of residential schools endured as the Church and Canadian government aggressively sought to—as Duncan Campbell Scott<sup>3</sup> infamously stated—“get rid of the Indian problem” (“Until”) via systematic measures of forced assimilation. The apple is also used in *The Mush Hole* as a symbol of the strength and resilience of Canada’s Indigenous peoples in the face of Canada’s colonial legacy, a symbol of hope and life.

The story of residential schools in Canada is not new. But like many stories that attest to Canada’s violent and patriarchal history—the stories of Chinese railroad workers and Japanese internment camps, the stories of Africville and the Acadian Expulsion, and many

others—this chapter of history is often viewed as closed, bracketed by an official apology and prefaced by an excuse. As audience members took their seats in the Spatz Theatre to watch the debut performance of *The Mush Hole*, the image that greeted them—a haunting black-and-white photograph of the historical Mohawk Institute overlaid with Scott’s instructions to “get rid of the Indian problem”—invoked the cries of stolen children suffocated by, as James Baldwin famously wrote, “the weight of white people in the world” (74). Scenes of sexual assault, institutional and domestic violence, starvation, addiction, imprisonment, isolation, and estrangement abound in *The Mush Hole*, reflecting the grim realities of the residential school system, as well as the realities of its legacy for generations of Survivors, their families, and communities. Played by an all-Indigenous cast of actor-dancers, the characters of *The Mush Hole* move through the Mohawk Institute, reconstructed—in part—on stage with the actual bricks and mortar of the building, as well as through historical photos and digital replicas of the school’s grounds and interior. The Institute is a veritable House of Horrors. In the boys’ playroom, male students are forced to fight one another in a place devoid of toys but fitted with a small jail cell. In the laundry room, where female students are forced to work for hours on end, menstruating young girls hide their blood-stained sheets. The noise of the boiler room conceals the cries of children—particularly boys—being sexually abused. Under a staircase is a cramped cubby hole, used for solitary confinement. In the basement, children hug the hot water pipes for warmth. The apples in the orchard grow in abundance.

This powerful performance, which speaks so strongly to and from the experience of residential school Survivors, stood appropriately at the heart of the 2018 Prismatic Arts Festival. It was produced with the support of the Prismatic Arts Festival’s “Level Up” program, which



*The Mush Hole*, Kaha:wi Dance Theatre Production (2018). From left to right: Julianne Blackbird as #11 / The One Who Got Away, Semiah Kaha:wi Smith as #17 / Grace, Montana Summers as #34 / Walter a.k.a. Wall Eye, and Santee Smith as #29 / Mabel. Photo provided by: The Prismatic Arts Festival.



***The Mush Hole*, Kaha:wi Dance Theatre Production (2018). From left to right: Jonathan Fisher as #48 / Ernest, Montana Summers as #34 / Walter a.k.a. Wall Eye, and Santee Smith as #29 / Mabel. Photo provided by: The Prismatic Arts Festival.**

commissions Indigenous and culturally diverse<sup>4</sup> artists and arts organizations to create new works or expand existing ones. Based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the Prismatic Arts Festival was founded in 2008 by Shahin Sayadi and Maggie Stewart in response to the limited opportunities afforded Indigenous and culturally diverse artists to present their work in featured, rather than sidelined, spaces. “In Halifax and the rest of Canada,” states Stewart, the festival’s Managing Director, “there were very few opportunities for Indigenous and culturally diverse artists to have their work presented on ‘mainstages.’” The Prismatic Arts Festival was thus founded as a way to address the “significant gap in the artistic ecology of Atlantic Canada” (Personal, 2018) by providing Indigenous and culturally diverse artists in the region and across Canada with performance and professionalizing opportunities. The festival also hosts numerous forums, known as “The Talk,” in which these creators can engage with other artists, audience members, cultural workers, and industry professionals dedicated to challenging the hegemony of whiteness that has dominated Canada’s theatre and arts culture both regionally and nationally. The artists showcased by Prismatic belong to communities that have often been denied access to the fruits of Canada’s professional artistic networks: funding opportunities, prominent performance venues, audiences, awards, and prestige. Still, their resilience, resistance, and creativity—like those of the Indigenous actor-dancers of *The Mush Hole*—have proven powerful and transformative.

As interdisciplinary arts festivals become an integral part of Canada’s artistic ecology and are “increasingly important for showcasing and developing new work by Canadian artists” (Ferguson 98), the efforts Prismatic has made and continues to make to bring historically underrepresented artists from Canada’s Indigenous, immigrant, diasporic, and Black communities to “the centre stage” (Stewart, Personal 2018) is helping to foster a more inclusive

and diverse theatre and arts culture in Canada. Yet just as the words “inclusivity” and “diversity” remain contested and dependent upon the perspectives of those who speak them, so too do the forms of cultural intervention available to multi-arts festivals like Prismatic in the context of the communities they serve and the audiences who attend them. In order to critique the Canadian mainstream, festivals like Prismatic must negotiate—at least to some degree—with some of that mainstream’s key assumptions. Prismatic was founded, not upon outright defiance of, but rather upon strategic negotiation with the realities, strengths, and limitations of Halifax arts ecologies. As the festival celebrates its tenth year, Prismatic continues its efforts to grow its audience base, strengthen its professional ties, and expand its geographic reach—both within and outside of Nova Scotia—to establish a festival model that encourages disciplinary, cultural, and regional alliances. This essay examines the development of the Prismatic Arts Festival, and the many ways the festival has sought to negotiate, challenge, and transform Halifax’s artistic landscape by creating a model that is locally-grounded, nationally-networked, and fundamentally devoted to advancing the careers and profiles of Indigenous and culturally diverse artists in Nova Scotia and across Canada both within and outside of mainstream performance cultures. Despite the challenges that Prismatic has faced and continues to face, the festival remains oriented towards a future of Canadian theatre in which cultural diversity and inclusivity are the norm, not the exception.

## “Creating our Allies” in Atlantic Canada

In 2003, Argentinian Canadian playwright, film writer, translator and actor Guillermo Verdecchia criticized Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism for having deleterious effects on the ability of artists from diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural heritages to fully participate in the mainstream economy of Canadian arts and culture:

Multiculturalism, or the official policy of promoting polyethnicity, remains [...] misunderstood as the promotion and celebration of folkloric, frozen-in-time, cultures of origin [...] Multiculturalism becomes a convenient little ghetto. On this view, ‘multiculturalism’ is the space where ‘ethnic’ artists do their thing and tell their stories [...] in their own language, to their own community; and no one outside those communities need ever attend... (108)

In Atlantic Canada in particular, the ways in which the discourse of multiculturalism has historically translated into a “convenient little ghetto” for artists working outside of dominant, Eurocentric theatre and performing arts traditions are related, at least in part, to the lack of funding, infrastructure, and development with which the region’s theatre culture as a whole has long had to grapple.

In her opening remarks at the *Shifting Tides: Atlantic Canadian Theatre Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* conference held at the University of Toronto’s then Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama<sup>7</sup> in March 2004, Mary Vingoe described her move to Toronto from Nova Scotia in 1976 as following “the time-honoured tradition of all Dalhousie theatre graduates”

(xv). She went on to state that, while great theatre is made in all corners of the country, the loci of English language theatre remain Alberta, Toronto, and Vancouver:

There is no secret about this [...]. I would say about 80% of the English language theatre in this country comes out of these three regions, and the reason is money. Government and corporate support, infrastructure and training, audience development and critical support, all contribute to a theatre community's sustainability. These are things that Atlantic Canada has lacked and still lacks. (xv)

Though these comments are now almost fifteen years old, they retain much of their force today. Although certain regional theatre companies such as 2b Theatre, Mermaid Theatre, Zuppa Theatre, Théâtre Populaire d'Acadie, and Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland have established strong funding bases and an international reputation, many others fight to survive. The theatre graduates of Dalhousie University, Memorial University's Grenfell Campus, Acadia University, and other Atlantic Canadian institutions still migrate in large numbers to Toronto, and when the new Artistic Director of Nova Scotia's regional theatre, Halifax's Neptune, cast his 2018 production of *Shakespeare in Love* entirely with locally-based actors, the decision was seen as so noteworthy that most critics made it a focal point of their reviews (Barnard; Campbell). Theatre-makers in Atlantic Canada have struggled, and continue to struggle, to stay afloat.

The challenges faced by artists in the region are exacerbated if those artists belong to marginalized and/or racialized groups. In an email interview with Linda Burnett in 2009, playwright and poet George Elliott Clarke—a native of Nova Scotia—expressed his frustration at the ways in which artists of colour have long been “ignored/underlooked/and undertheorized” (qtd. in Burnett xiii) by audiences, critics, industry professionals, and funding agencies in Atlantic Canada and Canada at large. The same is true of women. As Burnett argues in her introduction to *Theatre in Atlantic Canada*, female artists in Atlantic Canada have suffered a lack of attention and opportunities to appear on stage and in print: “Much less has been published by women or on the work of women than has been published by men or on the work of men in the area of theatre in Atlantic Canada” (xii). For Indigenous women and women of colour, as well as non-binary artists, this lack is even more pronounced. If Atlantic Canadian audiences—especially those in urban centres like Halifax—are becoming “increasingly diverse” and receptive to productions “that no longer need appeal to the traditional white middle-class audience of Canada's so called ‘main stages’ [...] nor to communities narrowly defined by culture or interest” (Knowles and Mündel xvii), this shift is, in part, due to the efforts of initiatives like the Prismatic Arts Festival that actively strive to redress historical and present inequities by creating spaces in which the work of culturally diverse artists can be showcased as a dynamic, powerful, central aspect of the Canadian cultural ecology.

The Prismatic Arts Festival was a project of Onelight Theatre, a Halifax-based professional theatre company founded by Sayadi and Stewart in 2002.<sup>6</sup> The festival emerged out of the struggles Onelight faced as the only professional theatre organization in Atlantic Canada that explicitly identified as “culturally diverse.” “We were the only organization in Atlantic Canada that received funding from the Canada Council Equity Office,” comments Stewart. “Shahin and I met with a representative of Canada Council and discussed the challenges



Onelight Theatre's promotional image for *Asheq: Ritual Music to Cure a Lover*. Photo provided by: The Prismatic Arts Festival.

we were facing, and it was suggested that Onelight find a way to create our allies” (Personal 2018). Establishing the Prismatic Arts Festival was, Sayadi and Stewart decided, one way to create their allies—that is, to help develop networks of artists, audiences, cultural workers, and sponsors in the region and across Canada committed to promoting and producing works by Indigenous and culturally diverse artists.

According to Stewart, at the time of Prismatic’s founding opportunities for these artists to perform outside of festivals devoted to multiculturalism or events aimed at specific audiences were slim. Due to this lack of exposure, mainstream audiences in Atlantic Canada lacked the “context for understanding and appreciating professional Indigenous and culturally [diverse] art work” (Personal 2018). For Stewart, the key word here is *professional*. Since its founding in 2008, the Prismatic Arts Festival has emphasized the professional nature of its artists, highlighting their artistic achievements in regional, national, and international arenas. In this way, Prismatic has sought to distance itself from amateur “community theatre” and from familiar multicultural events in an effort to popularize and, to some degree, monetize the festival by emphasizing the cultural and social capital of its artists. Many of the artists Prismatic has featured over the years have won top Canadian awards in their fields, from JUNOS to ECMAs to a Sobey Award.<sup>7</sup> They have earned fellowships and placements in prestigious programs across Canada and internationally (such as those of The Banff Centre for the Arts, the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, and The Juilliard School of Music), collaborated with internationally and nationally-acclaimed artists (Kanye West, Anderson Paak), and performed in world-class venues (Carnegie Hall, the Louvre Museum, and the Théâtre de la Ville



in Paris). By foregrounding the professional nature of these artists—as defined, narrowly, by mainstream industry standards of success such as training, prestige, awards, and acclaim—Prismatic attempts to move beyond the “convenient little ghetto[s]” of multiculturalism to vie for space within dominant frameworks of success and professionalism that, to a degree, still relegate Indigenous and culturally diverse artists to the fringes of Canadian arts and culture.

Indeed, the absence of the word “multicultural” anywhere in the festival’s lexicon is telling of the challenges Prismatic initially faced to distinguish itself from multicultural and “ethnic” festivals. Halifax is home to a variety of such festivals, including the Multicultural Festival, Greek Fest, India Fest, and two Lebanese festivals—one for Christian Lebanese Canadians, the other for Muslim Lebanese Canadians. These festivals are generally well attended, family-oriented, and free. They offer outsiders the chance to sample “exotic” foods, watch traditional musical and dance performances, and peruse tables of folk arts, fashion and crafts. They are fun, easy, and the cultural equivalent of a buffet: there is something for everyone. In fact, multicultural festivals are often advertised as all-inclusive cultural affairs, promoting togetherness, unity, and social harmony. A study conducted by researchers at the University of Queensland in 2012 argued that multicultural festivals play key roles in fostering community cohesion and identity, developing social capital, and enhancing civic pride (Lee et al. 93). But the fact that these values continue to be seen as quite separate from those associated with “professional” performance in Canadian society helps to explain the “significant challenges” that Prismatic faced in its early years to distinguish “our festival from multiculturalism/community/amateur programming” (Stewart, Personal 2018). Nevertheless, the fact that the festival’s slogan, “Art for Everyone,” adopts the same promotional language as many multicultural festivals indicates the ways in which Prismatic has implicitly relied on the dominant discourses of multiculturalism to attract audiences and garner public and critical support, while simultaneously resisting those discourses’ potentially ghettoizing and insulating effects.

In addition to featuring established artists, Prismatic programs emerging or “break out” artists each year, helping them gain exposure and increased access to funding and performance opportunities. Winnipeg-based band The Mariachi Ghost, for example, were able to premiere their show, *Rencor Vivo*—a multi-media “spectacle of theatre, music, dance, video and projection” (Prismatic, “Mariachi”)—at the Prismatic Arts Festival in 2018 through the creative and financial support of Prismatic’s “Level Up”<sup>8</sup> program. This work built in turn on the band’s highly successful, sold-out performances at Prismatic 2017. The sequence from festival performance through development to the premiere of a new work illustrates Prismatic’s ongoing, supportive relationships with its invited artists.

Opportunities for dialogue and interaction between artists, audiences, and cultural workers are also an annual component of Prismatic, as the festival regularly includes discussion panels (“The Talk”), Q & A sessions, and Masterclasses as part of its programming. Direct audience engagement is another critical aspect of Prismatic’s “holistic approach” (Stewart, Personal 2018) to fostering a more diverse and inclusive theatre and arts culture in Canada. Following the matinee performance of *The Mush Hole* at Prismatic 2018, for example, audience members had the opportunity to speak with Smith directly about the creation and development of her show, and—more generally—about the history and legacies of Canada’s residential schools. Survivors of the Shubenacadie residential school<sup>9</sup> were present in the

audience and spoke to their own experiences of brutality and abuse at the hands of the Canadian government, as well as their personal and communal journeys of hope and healing. While *The Mush Hole* is based on stories from Ontario, its debut in Halifax—enabled, in part, through the material support of Prismatic—gave testimony to the ways in which Canada’s legacy of residential schools is both nationally significant and locally felt. Moreover, the Halifax-debut of *The Mush Hole* both allowed for the artistic enrichment of the piece, as it was shown to a new audience, and expanded the extra-theatrical discussions around Canada’s residential school system. *The Mush Hole* debuted to audience members both unfamiliar and all-too painfully familiar with the awful reality of the residential school system. *The Mush Hole* brought “home,” so to speak, the need to witness and reckon with the stories of Survivors across regional, disciplinary and artistic borders, while honouring the lived experiences and local stories of Survivors in our midst. Prismatic’s role as a festival that not only reflects, but also fosters and helps to create, a diverse ecology of theatrical allies in Atlantic Canada could hardly be better exemplified than here.

## A Complex Negotiation

As Alex Lazaridis Ferguson argues, interdisciplinary festivals like Prismatic play an important role in shaping the careers of Canadian artists, as well as in fostering the creation and development of new work:

A Canadian artist’s reputation is enhanced when she is presented at such festivals. This, in turn, gives her leverage when applying to state arts councils and private foundations for funding. A successful funding application provides money for the artist to develop and produce work, and strengthens the artist’s position when trying to form partnerships with festival curators. The relationship is circular: presentations can lead to successful funding applications, which can lead to further presentations. (Ferguson 99)

If Ferguson’s arguments are just, then one might argue that the very existence of a multi-arts festival that, like Prismatic, seeks to combat the systemic racism that affects Canadian theatrical economies depends upon a complex negotiation. In order to critique and transform those economies it may need to begin by acknowledging—if not necessarily accepting without question—some of their foundational premises: that an artist whose work is frequently presented is better than one whose work remains unseen; that an artist who has already received public funding is more worthy of such funding than one who has not; that professional status and artistic quality go hand in hand. Because these values have often served the self-confirming hegemony of the historically Eurocentric Canadian theatre establishment, such an acknowledgment is necessarily a fraught and complex one.

Nevertheless, by working to some extent within the established frameworks of Canada’s professional arts communities, companies like Onelight and festivals like Prismatic have had a substantial impact upon those communities. They have not only helped render more widely visible the many contributions made by Indigenous and culturally diverse artists to Canada’s

artistic ecologies, but have also formed alliances and networks that have helped successfully to challenge the status quo. When Simon Brault, CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts, gave the opening keynote address at the 2016 Prismatic Festival, he foregrounded the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion to the Council's new strategic plan. He emphasized new funding opportunities such as the Creating, Knowing, and Sharing Program, which offers support for the Arts and Cultures of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples. He also noted changes to procedures at the Canada Council designed to require "organizations that ask for core (or operational) funding to be more accountable and to take bold steps to advance equity and reflect diversity." In the process, he emphasized the impact of Prismatic and the artists it showcases. Alluding to Halifax's "renowned and diverse arts scene," he remarked to the artists in the audiences that

you, and your many vibrant arts practices, have built this art scene. And you've do [sic] so, despite a history of segregation and disenfranchisement. Despite the real public funding challenges in the region. And despite feeling outside of the funding culture. I urge you to continue to push against doors and windows.

Not only by making such statements, but also by making them within the context of the Prismatic Festival's opening night, Brault underlined the extent to which the Festival's simultaneous participation in and critique of the Canadian arts establishment has contributed to an ongoing process of change.

In so doing, Prismatic and the artists it showcases have participated in a crucial shift in Canadian performance history. In *Staging Strangers: Theatre and Global Ethics*, Barry Freeman argues that, after the "overt multiculturalism of the 1970s and 80s" (59), Canadian theatre underwent a transformation:

At that time, artists who felt excluded from the predominantly white, Anglo theatre began to form new professional or semi-professional culturally focused theatre groups that, by working in English and performing in more established theatre spaces, would speak both into cultural communities and beyond them to a broader public. (59)

The Prismatic Arts Festival is among the progeny of this movement. Sayadi and Stewart founded Onelight Theatre, at least in part, in order to intervene in the predominantly white, Anglophone theatre of Atlantic Canada by providing opportunities for artists to develop "new material based on artistic works and stories from diverse cultures and artistic forms" (Prismatic, "Level Up"). The road has by no means been an easy one.

As the only theatre company in Atlantic Canada with this vision and mandate, Onelight struggled to find funding, allies, and audiences. Within the existing framework of Atlantic Canadian theatre, attracting audiences to new works of theatre by Indigenous or minoritized artists—especially those that challenge the monolingual,<sup>10</sup> Eurocentric traditions of English-language theatre in the Atlantic region—proved frighteningly hard. While Halifax is nationally reputed for its music scene—music festivals like The Halifax Pop Explosion, the OBEY convention, and the Halifax Jazz Festival regularly host sold-out shows—theatre is less on the city's cultural radar. The challenges that Onelight faced provided the impetus

for the Prismatic Arts Festival. Sayadi and Stewart realized that they would have to create a forum that would appeal to audiences from diverse demographics, cultural backgrounds, and artistic tastes in order to bring the work of leading Indigenous and culturally diverse artists to the Halifax public. Theatre, on its own, would not suffice: “We knew that in order to be able to showcase leading artists and to appeal to a broad audience, Prismatic would have to be a multi-arts festival” (Stewart, Personal 2018). Thus, the Prismatic Arts Festival was born.

In its debut year, Prismatic joined forces with the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) and a variety of artists, arts and heritage organizations, and theatre companies to present four days of showcased performances, panel discussions, and networking opportunities: “The festival started out in 2008 with mainstage performances—like a showcase—at the Neptune Studio” (Stewart, Personal 2018). Founded in 1963, Neptune Theatre self-identifies as “Atlantic Canada’s largest professional regional theatre” (Neptune). Its mainstage is predominantly reserved for productions of popular musicals, Broadway successes, European and North American classics, and family-friendly content. Neptune’s 2018-19 season, for example, included mainstage features of *Shakespeare in Love*, *Cinderella*, and *Noises Off*. Though it offered two plays rooted in the work and lived experience of women of colour, only one of them—Shauntay Grant’s *The Bridge*—was a new Canadian work, while the other, *The Colour Purple*, was a musical adaptation of Alice Walker’s novel that had already achieved Broadway success. The Neptune Studio (Scotiabank Theatre), however, offers a smaller, though still sizeable space for the production, development, and premiere of new and experimental works by emerging or break-out artists. It was here that Prismatic got its start, holding panel discussions and networking events during the day and showcase performances at night.

Onelight’s decision to debut the Prismatic Arts Festival on Neptune’s studio stage was a strategic effort to gain visibility for Indigenous and culturally diverse artists by presenting them in a venue with professional reputé and mainstream appeal: a venue recognized by many white, middle-class audience members as a guarantor of quality. By holding the first incarnation of the Prismatic Arts Festival at Neptune Theatre, Prismatic sought to attract a larger audience base that smaller theatre venues in Halifax—such as the Bus Stop Theatre, or the now-defunct Living Room—do (or did) not have the capacity to hold, due to limitations in size, space, and, to some degree, regular patronage and industry support. Furthermore, as Neptune productions are more frequently reviewed by mainstream newspapers and media outlets in Halifax than productions by smaller independent theatres, Onelight hoped to attract the same degree of press coverage and critical attention for the Prismatic Arts Festival that large-scale Neptune productions enjoy, and thereby enter more fully into Halifax’s mainstream cultural economy by gaining public notice and critical acclaim. If the Prismatic Arts Festival acceded to the (highly debatable) assumption that professional theatre only occurs on professional stages by debuting the festival at Neptune Theatre, it did so with the aim of capitalizing on Neptune’s reputation and recognisability as Atlantic Canada’s largest regional theatre to advertise the calibre and quality of Prismatic’s Indigenous and culturally diverse artists, and thereby vie for their recognition and right of inclusion within Halifax’s dominant theatre culture.

The first incarnation of the Prismatic Arts Festival featured eight showcase performances by artists working in a variety of mediums: spoken word, music, dance, and storytelling. The performers included artists from Black Nova Scotian communities: spoken word artist

El Jones, author and storyteller Shauntay Grant, and The Deep River Boys (now known as the Sanctified Brothers), a men's gospel group from North Preston, Nova Scotia (often described as the oldest and largest Black community in Canada).<sup>11</sup> The festival also featured musical performances by the Halifax-based Korean percussion group, Sa-Mul-Nori; the JUNO award-winning Iranian Canadian percussionist and composer Ziya Tabassian; Dinuk Wijeratne, a Sri-Lankan born JUNO award-winning composer, conductor, and pianist; and Gina Burgess, a violinist, composer, four-time winner of an East Coast Music Award (ECMA), and member of the Iqaluit-based Arctic rock band The Jerry Cans. Marie Osmonde, a Spanish Canadian Flamenco dancer and choreographer, was also featured. Music was the dominant genre at Prismatic's premiere festival, a choice that allowed Prismatic to capitalize on the strengths of Halifax's music scene by scheduling artists like Wijeratne and Burgess who already had a large following in the region and could attract crowds. In this way, Prismatic encouraged audiences to come out while reminding them of the many culturally diverse, celebrated artists in their midst—artists who had already, to some degree, proved themselves worthy of critical recognition and public acclaim within Halifax's dominant, Eurocentric culture and who could, to put it bluntly, sell tickets to the festival.

Notably, Indigenous artists were absent from the first festival. In recognition of this gaping void, by 2010 Prismatic had expanded its mandate to feature works by Indigenous *and* culturally diverse artists, recognizing the ways in which the festival's original mandate to bring "culturally diverse" artists to the stage excluded the voices of Indigenous artists, and their "performative interventions on the colonial project through potent articulations of reclamation" (Carter 33). The second incarnation of the Prismatic Arts Festival thus featured two film screenings by Indigenous film-makers, an art installation by Ursula Johnson, and a production of Daniel David Moses' *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, directed by Michael Greyeyes. Like *The Mush Hole*, *Almighty Voice and His Wife* foregrounds the voices, experiences—and performances—of Indigenous peoples while potently critiquing the "white gaze" that has dominated arts and theatre culture in Canada. The play challenges generic and disciplinary borders, as well as cultural taboos, to biting satire the ways in which Indigenous artists are frequently called upon to perform Indianness in ways that appease white audiences and reinforce dominant stereotypes of Indigenous peoples and their experiences. As Roberta Barker, Associate Professor of Theatre Studies at Dalhousie University, recalls, there were only approximately thirty people in attendance for the matinee performance<sup>12</sup> of *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, including students from Barker's class. Nevertheless, "my students [...] said they were 'blown away' but also 'processing it' and 'needing to think about it' afterwards." For Barker, the play, which "is extremely funny, often in an uncomfortable

The main graphic for Prismatic 2018.  
Photo provided by: The Prismatic Arts  
Festival.



way,” needs to be seen live: “I think it’s one of the true masterpieces of the Canadian theatrical canon. There are aspects of its extremely sophisticated and challenging dramaturgy that can’t be understood until one sees it, as it’s so deeply theatrical.” *Almighty Voice and His Wife* defiantly looks back at colonial culture, and demands it make space for Indigenous performers and artists to tell their own stories on their own terms. Prismatic’s efforts to bring the play to Halifax audiences in 2010 — and the festival’s revised mandate to feature Indigenous artists as part of its programming — helped, and continues to help, create such spaces, where the voices of Indigenous artists can be heard and their stories can be told.

The interdisciplinary and inter-cultural nature of many of the works that Prismatic supports and showcases attests to Prismatic’s long-standing commitment to, as Freeman articulates it in *Staging Strangers*, “creat[ing] a new space of cultural contestation wherein difference [can] be exposed and interrogated” (59). Prismatic’s programming regularly includes works of theatre, music, film, art, and spoken word that cross cultural, generic, and even linguistic borders. For example, in 2016 the Prismatic Arts festival featured *The Raft*, an international co-production by Kitchener, Ontario’s MT Space Theatre and Tunisia’s El Hamra Theatre about a group of migrants crammed together on a small raft. The play appeared on the Dunn Theatre stage at the Dalhousie Arts Centre, one of Halifax’s key venues for local and student performances. Unlike those primarily English-language productions, *The Raft* was presented in Arabic with English surtitles, a testament to the ways in which “[s]tages that once were platforms for voicing local stories now commonly feature stories about distant places and issues as well” (Freeman 3). As Halifax is home to multiple immigrant as well as refugee communities, *The Raft*’s appearance at the 2016 Prismatic Arts Festival attested to the ways in which local stories are no longer limited — and perhaps have never been — to regional or geographic contexts or concerns. Stories of migration and displacement are vital to understanding the ways in which the local is increasingly informed by issues of national and global significance. Prismatic’s efforts to stage productions that cross cultural as well as linguistic and generic boundaries is a key strategy of their vision to transform Halifax and Canadian performance ecologies, to create “new space[s] of cultural contestation” (Freeman 59).

In order to achieve their vision of radically transforming the professional Canadian performance landscape, artists like Sayadi, Stewart, and many of their Prismatic collaborators have depended at least in part upon the funds and other supports provided by key institutions within that landscape, which include not only theatrical and educational institutions such as Neptune Theatre and Dalhousie University, but also funding bodies such as the Canada Council for the Arts. As early as 1988, Beverly Yhap argued that such bodies needed to “step up” and provide professional development and funding opportunities for Indigenous and minority artists to help dismantle the hegemony of whiteness that has long dominated Canadian arts and theatre (20). When, almost thirty years later, Simon Brault appeared at the opening gala of the 2016 Prismatic Arts Festival to underline the Canada Council’s steps to redress inequities within Canadian theatre, he attested both to these bodies’ ongoing efforts to answer calls like Yhap’s and to the relatively slow pace at which change has occurred. As Prismatic collaborates with such bodies, it too must grapple with the ways in which its choices may affect the speed of transformation within the Canadian arts scene.

This point was underlined by Prismatic's decisions in the year of Brault's address. That year, the Prismatic Arts Festival featured Indigenous and culturally diverse female performers and cultural producers exclusively. As Stewart put it, "In 2016, in recognition that most of the artists featured at Prismatic 2014 and Prismatic 2015 were men, the festival featured only Indigenous and culturally diverse women in all artistic and professional development programming" (Personal 2018). This programming was aimed at challenging not only the hegemony of whiteness in Canadian theatre and arts, but also the hegemony of male-identified artists—a hegemony to which, as Stewart's remarks acknowledge, Prismatic has sometimes tacitly acceded.

As the choice to foreground female-identified artists shows, a strong degree of self-criticism forms part of the complex negotiation involved in Prismatic's mandate as "Canada's only multi-arts festival featuring culturally diverse and Aboriginal artists." Although this claim is not entirely accurate—Ontario's IMPACT and RUTAS are also multi-arts festivals that feature culturally diverse and Indigenous artists—Prismatic's efforts to promote itself as a unique festival within Canada reveals, to an extent, the ways in which Prismatic has sought to establish Atlantic Canada, and particularly Halifax, as an important site of arts and theatre in Canada, wherein artists of local *and* national import are actively creating and producing "new space[s] of cultural contestation" beyond the loci of Alberta, Ontario, and British Columbia (Freeman 59). Yet Prismatic's mandate also reflects their earlier realization that their original slates of culturally diverse artists had excluded Indigenous artists, and the course the Festival subsequently took to redress that exclusion. Sayadi, Stewart, and their collaborators are constantly called upon to redefine who is included—and excluded—in their definition of such terms so that they, in their turn, can fulfill their mission of calling upon other Canadian arts organizations to do the same. In a 2016 interview with *The Chronicle Herald*, Stewart criticized the ways in which many arts festivals only pay lip service to gender and cultural diversity:

I think women and women of colour have become just another box to tick for arts festivals today. As long as you have one in the lineup, that's good enough [...] We felt that [Prismatic 2016] was key to demonstrating to our festival/presenter colleagues that there really is no excuse for not having diverse programming in their events. (qtd. in Webster)

If Prismatic's 2017 and 2018 festivals are any indication, Prismatic is now committed to featuring Indigenous women and women of colour in its annual programming, adopting the same mandate of cultural and gender diversity it demands of its peers. The 2017 and 2018 Prismatic Arts Festivals, for example, programmed a balance of male and female-identifying artists.

Another visible aspect of Prismatic's negotiation with its audience in its effort simultaneously to build and transform senses of community and belonging within Atlantic Canadian performance ecologies is the recurring presence of certain almost talismanic performers on its roster. These performers have not only achieved recognition within their own communities, but also within the dominant culture, in terms of public recognition and industry success. According to Stewart, these performers help advance the public profile of the Prismatic Arts Festival, as their repeat presence at the festival encourages audience support and cultural familiarity: "The challenge," Stewart explains, "has been getting audiences to come out for

presentations of new (unfamiliar) shows by artists who are often not well known in Atlantic Canada. We have addressed that, in part, by programming the same artists every few years [...] this way audiences become familiar with the artists and their work” (Personal 2018). Smith is a frequent face at Prismatic, as are Grant, Jones, Wijeratne, and the multi-media artist Stephanie Yee.<sup>13</sup> Prismatic’s efforts to build audience familiarity with local artists have, in part, lead to the formation of vital and long-standing relationships between these artists and the communities they represent. For example, Grant’s regular appearances at the Prismatic Arts Festival have helped to establish her as a prominent and beloved figure of Nova Scotia’s arts scene dedicated to representing the unique experiences, histories, and voices of Nova Scotia’s Black communities. In 2018, Grant launched her book *Africville* (a finalist for the Governor General’s Literary award) as part of the Prismatic Arts Festival, which follows a young girl’s visit to—and imaginings of—the historic *Africville* in Halifax.<sup>14</sup> Grant’s commitment to telling the stories of underrepresented or marginalized voices in Nova Scotia has gained her a dedicated following.

In 2019, Grant’s play *The Bridge* at Neptune Theatre saw an impressive turnout by members of Nova Scotia’s Black communities. The play is set in a fictional rural Black Nova Scotian community and, as Grant acknowledges in an interview with Matt Reeder, deliberately contains elements that “localize the play and make it feel familiar—particularly the language and music of ‘the world the characters inhabit.’” The popularity of *The Bridge* attests to the ways in which building familiarity—or bridges—between local artists and their communities can create necessary and long-overdue spaces of representation and recognition for marginalized populations and cultures. Programming artists or work that “feel[s] familiar” to audiences does not mean the work lacks the power to unsettle or contest dominant structures of injustice and inequity either. Jones’ recurrent presence at the Prismatic Arts Festival, for example, demonstrates Prismatic’s commitment to programming work that is subversive, provocative, and often oppositional to master narratives of Canada. Jones is a controversial and well-known artist and activist in Halifax and Dartmouth known for fearlessly speaking out against social inequities, racialized discrimination, and patriarchal and colonial structures of power. While Jones may be a familiar figure to Prismatic audiences, as well as to the larger public, her performances rarely allow for passive enjoyment, and instead demand audiences come face-to-face with the structures of violence and oppression that exist in their midst, and their complicity within.

Prismatic’s efforts to schedule repeat performers are part of the festival’s quest to create “art for everyone” that nonetheless foregrounds the uniqueness and cultural diversity of the Atlantic region’s communities, and thereby works to redefine the region’s cultural and artistic identity both within and outside of dominant frameworks of representation. Along with this quest to create “art for everyone” has come an ongoing quest for a home to which “everyone” can and will come. For Prismatic, “everyone” is constituted by members of both dominant and marginalized communities in the HRM, from regular theatre-goers and arts patrons to people who rarely attend cultural events but may buy tickets to see specific performances or support particular artists. “Everyone,” in other words, represents Prismatic’s aim to attract as broad a spectatorship as possible to deal, in part, with the practical challenges of holding an annual multi-arts festival in Atlantic Canada, as well as to establish Prismatic as a prominent player within Canada’s festival market, and, in so doing, help foreground the importance



of Indigenous and culturally diverse artists to Canada's arts and theatre culture. In 2013, as part of this quest, Prismatic<sup>15</sup> moved temporarily from a multi-venue format to a semi-permanent home at Alderney Landing.<sup>16</sup> In a 2014 article for *alt.theatre*, Stewart explained the logic behind the move:

So, why move to Alderney? Alderney, the large community cultural centre located on the Halifax-harbour, offers an art gallery, a 300-seat sprung-floor theatre space, an outdoor stage with capacity for over 5,000 people, and is connected to a branch of the Halifax Public Library. In the past, Onelight rented space for rehearsals and productions (most recently, the Neptune Studio). Prismatic was held at multiple venues in the city, and thus, without a clear home, it was challenging to establish a connection with our audience. Alderney provides us with the facilities and community exposure that will allow us to advance our programming and reach a wider audience. ("Prismatic" 30)

As Stewart explains, the move to Alderney Landing provided Prismatic with a home base from which to operate, enabling the festival to shift from a multi-venue format to a single location. The shift also provided Prismatic with the opportunity to host a summer festival on Alderney Landing's outdoor stage, which has a history of holding free summer concerts that may be attended—depending on the popularity of the performer(s)—by thousands of people from the HRM. The move to Alderney Landing brought many opportunities for Prismatic and placed the festival in a position to attract significantly larger audiences, which has always been—and continues to be—one of Prismatic's primary aims: "Having a single, multipurpose venue to house our festival and conference allowed Prismatic 2014 to welcome over 10,000 audience members to 81 presentations and workshops featuring the talents of 163 artists and arts professionals" (Stewart, "Prismatic" 31). These artists included long-time Prismatic contributors, including the Sanctified Brothers and Smith, as well as emerging artists engaged in various fields of cultural production: spoken word artist Allysa Flint; photographer Jayme-Lynne Gloade, and a cappella musical group Eh440. The Ottawa-based Indigenous electronic group, *A Tribe Called Red*, closed the festival with a performance that saw approximately 3,000 people in attendance, Prismatic's largest crowd to date. The success of this event heightened Prismatic's visibility in Halifax and Atlantic Canada and strengthened the popularity and exposure of these artists.

But just as the move to Alderney Landing brought many opportunities to Prismatic, so too did it present many challenges. There were, as Stewart admits, "significant costs" (Personal 2018) involved with holding Prismatic at Alderney Landing. Stewart also acknowledges that the move to a single-venue, summer festival format had too much impact on Prismatic's programming, as the festival began to hold more popular music events to fill seats and sell tickets, relying once again on the strength of Atlantic Canada's music scene to attract audiences. As such, attendance at theatre and dance performances noticeably dwindled, and Prismatic's "multi-arts" festival began to look more like a music festival, of which Halifax has many: "We presented more music, and more 'popular' genres of music. We also had dance, theatre, visual arts, spoken word—but most of that was indoors at the Alderney Landing theatre and it was challenging to draw people indoors in August to see theatre and dance shows" (Personal 2018).

Theatre, in particular, suffered at Alderney Landing. In 2016, Prismatic returned to its roots, deciding that a multi-venue festival was more suited to its multi-arts format: “Moving back to a multi-venue festival allowed Prismatic to present work in the spaces that were best-suited to the work (theatre size, location, audience, etc.)” (Stewart, Personal 2018).

As festivals do not simply attract or reflect their audiences but actively constitute them, Prismatic’s move to Alderney Landing (and subsequently back to Halifax) required Prismatic to renegotiate the terms of the festival’s diversity mandate, and reconsider the sacrifices the festival was willing—or unwilling—to make regarding its programming and format. While the move to Alderney Landing provided Prismatic with the largest audience turn-out it has experienced to date, that turn-out was, in part, motivated by the fact that *A Tribe Called Red*, albeit Indigenous, was already a widely-acclaimed musical group within Canada and beyond, and therefore required less effort on Prismatic’s part to draw audiences to their show in comparison to other, lesser-known artists on the festival’s bill, especially those working within less accessible or popular forms such theatre. In this way, Prismatic’s diversity mandate was negatively impacted by its move to Alderney, as the festival was able to (momentarily) reach a significantly larger audience base, but at the expense of the diversity of the artists and genres the festival represents. In addition, while according to Stewart, the move back to a multi-venue festival attests to Prismatic’s commitment to artistic integrity and audience accessibility, it is far more likely the result of significant monetary challenges, and, as such, is representative of the many practical challenges that theatre companies in the region face to find a “home” that can accommodate their work, audiences, and vision.

Not only have independent theatre companies in Halifax struggled to find audiences, they have also struggled to find space. In a 2009 article published by *The Coast*, a Halifax-based independent newspaper, Tara Thorne details the struggles of local artists and theatre-makers to find spaces in the city to rehearse and perform:

Space is an issue for any artists, in all towns but especially this one, where rents are high and vacancies are not. And it’s always been that way—independent theatre companies in the city have had to make do with bedroom readings, schedule bartering and budget stretching—and, in the case of Shakespeare by the Sea, weather—just to rehearse in the spaces from which they present theatre, never mind the actual productions.

When Onelight began in 2002, it operated out of a tiny space located in central Halifax, nicknamed by Sayadi and Stewart “The Crib.” “Maggie and I started The Crib on Gottingen Street at [the] back of a grocery store,” explained Sayadi in a 2015 interview with Stephanie Johns for *The Coast*. “It was called The Crib because our daughter was there.” As Vingoe explained to Tara Thorne of *The Coast* in 2009, finding a permanent or semi-permanent home offers theatre companies a way to impact and interact with their communities on a larger scale. When Eastern Front Theatre relocated to the Alderney Landing Convention Centre in 1996—the company experienced a sense of belonging and security it had previously not known:

We’d been itinerant, like everyone else [...] Whether we like it or not, audiences identify with buildings. We as artists may not like that, but it gave us a sense of

stability—we had arrived, we were more than just a bunch of artists doing work. We were an actual company that could develop shows and impact the community the way that Neptune could, because we had a home. (Vingoe, qtd. in Thorne)

While the move to Alderney Landing Convention Centre brought the Prismatic Arts Festival in closer proximity to Dartmouth's Black Nova Scotian communities, and, in theory, made the festival more accessible to those communities, the move also alienated the festival from the cultural "hub" of Halifax and the social capital that entails. Dartmouth is only slowly beginning to appear in the dominant public mindset as a place to partake in theatre and other arts, and its increasing visibility is, in part, due to processes of gentrification and capital development. Despite the runaway success of the 2014 Prismatic Arts Festival, Onelight continued to struggle to garner audience support: "It's a challenge to bring people here—a lot of people don't know there's a theatre here," stated Sayadi in 2015 to *The Coast* (qtd. in Johns).

## "If Only We Could Have Danced"

Prismatic's ongoing struggle to find physical and critical spaces in Nova Scotia for its artists may partially explain the festival's scheduled move to Ottawa in 2019. In partnership with the Great Canadian Theatre Company—Ottawa's largest professional, independent theatre company—the Prismatic Arts Festival will host a special festival and its first International Arts Market in Ottawa in 2019. In a recent press release, Prismatic describes the move as keeping with the festival's mandate and vision:

The International Market expansion directly correlates with Prismatic's mandate to bring Canada's leading Indigenous and culturally diverse artists to wide audiences, to create opportunities for the public to learn about new forms and traditions, and the development of new emerging and professional artists. The Market will connect producers, presenters, and festivals around the globe to the work of Canada's leading Indigenous and culturally diverse artists in performing, visual, media and literary arts. (Prismatic)

While Stewart explains that "2019 in Ottawa is a test, not a permanent move," she acknowledges that depending on the success of the 2019 Prismatic Arts Festival, the festival may consider a permanent relocation.<sup>17</sup> According to Stewart, Prismatic "has always been a national festival" (Personal 2019), though this statement belies, to a degree, much of the rhetoric Prismatic has used over the years to distinguish itself as a unique and vital contribution to the artistic ecologies of Atlantic Canada. Indeed, Prismatic's move to Ottawa—temporary or not—seems to leave "the local" behind, as the festival aims to "go global" by promoting Canada's leading Indigenous and culturally diverse artists within the discourse and economy of the festival market. Whether Prismatic's aim to increasingly commercialize and globalize will negatively impact the festival's diversity mandate—Prismatic may, for example, base its programming decisions on an artist's commercial appeal or national recognisability—remains to be seen.

Still, the move to Ottawa does not shift the festival's vision too far from its original (and continued) mandate to increase the visibility, recognition, and professional networks of Indigenous and culturally diverse artists across regional and cultural divides. Over the past decade, Prismatic has had to engage in a complex set of negotiations that both acknowledge and resist the dominant frameworks of representation for theatre artists in Canada. While Prismatic's move to Ottawa in 2019 may be troubling for Halifax's theatre and arts culture, it nonetheless represents a further step in the festival's continued effort to enter into the mainstream economy of Canadian arts and culture by foregrounding—not sacrificing—the stories, voices, and experiences of Indigenous and culturally diverse artists and the communities they represent. As *The Mush Hole* exemplifies, the work of these artists is integral to processes of reconciliation, decolonization, and the dismantling of oppressive patriarchal structures in Canada. It is also vital to the communities they serve and the people whose stories, whose pain, they embody. After watching *The Mush Hole*, residential school Survivor Doug George-Kanentiio remarked, "If only we could have danced..." (*Mush Hole*, Playbill). The Prismatic Festival continues to strive to offer spaces in which long-denied dances can take place.

## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Roberta Barker for her insight and contributions to the development of this article. I would also like to thank Maggie Stewart for agreeing to multiple interviews, and Ric Knowles for his sharp editorial eye.
- 2 After closing in 1970, the Mohawk Institute was re-opened in 1972 as the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario. In 2013, members of the Six Nations of the Grand River community voted in favour of restoring the former residential school as opposed to demolishing it in order to "uphold the spirit of the children who 'served time' in the schools" (*Mush Hole*, Playbill). The building stands as a reminder of the ways in which the processes of truth, reconciliation, and healing are ongoing in Canada, testifying to the idea that the past lives in the present.
- 3 Scott was the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs from 1913-1932. In 1920, Scott proposed an amendment to the Indian Act, which was implemented that same year, that mandated Indigenous children between the ages of seven and fifteen attend residential schools (Boyd 143).
- 4 The term "culturally diverse" is used by the Prismatic Arts Festival as short-hand for artists from non-dominant ethnic, racial, cultural, and national heritages. These artists typically belong to visible minority or racialized groups in Canada from immigrant, Black, and diasporic communities.
- 5 Now called The Centre for Drama, Theatre & Performance Studies
- 6 Sayadi is currently the Artistic and Executive Director of Onelight. Stewart is a volunteer strategic consultant.
- 7 For example, Dinuk Wijeratne is a JUNO-award winning artist. The violinist Gina Burgess is a four-time East Coast Music Award (ECMA) winner. In 2017, Halifax-based multimedia artist Ursula Johnson won the Sobey Art Award, which is widely regarded as the most "significant bellwether of contemporary art practice in the country" (Whyte, par.2). Johnson is a Mi'kmaw artist whose practice draws from her Indigenous heritage

to critique—often satirically—Canada’s legacy of colonization. She is a regular performer at the Prismatic Arts Festival, and the first artist to win the Sobey Art Award in Atlantic Canada.

- 8 Prismatic’s “Level Up” program is supported by funding by a Canada Council for the Arts New Development Grant. The program commissions artists and arts organizations to create new works or expand existing ones. Audiences are given opportunities to engage with the development of these works through workshop presentations (Prismatic, “Level Up”).
- 9 Located in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School operated from 1929-1967. Like the Mohawk Institute, the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School was “notoriously poorly provisioned, often short on such basics as desks and books” (Wells 365). The school burned down in 1986.
- 10 Onelight presents plays that incorporate multiple languages in their dialogue and musical scores. The company’s most recent productions, *Asheq: Ritual Music to Cure a Lover* and *Chess with the Domsday Machine*, for example, are presented in a “blend of Farsi, English and human expressions” (Onelight).
- 11 North Preston is predominantly populated by descendants of the Black Loyalists, Jamaican Maroons and Black Refugees who migrated to Canada in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (“African Nova Scotians”).
- 12 There were two performances of the play at the festival, matinee and evening at the Sir James Dunn Theatre.
- 13 Yee hosts “Broken English karaoke,” an after-hours Prismatic event that “explores the community, social anxieties and the complexities of translation through karaoke culture” (Prismatic, “Broken”).
- 14 Africville was settled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by members from the Black Refugee communities of Hammonds Plains and Preston, N.S. It was home to a vibrant Black community for approximately 150 years, despite the fact that residents lived without access to medical services, paved roads, running water, and proper sewage systems. Africville was demolished in the 1960s and 70s by city officials as part of an “urban renewal” project. It now exists as a public park located in Halifax’s north end (Nova Scotia).
- 15 Both Onelight and the Prismatic Arts Festival moved to Alderney Landing in 2013.
- 16 The Alderney Landing Convention Centre is located in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, a small city located in the harbour from Halifax that forms a key part of the Halifax Regional Municipality.
- 17 The 2019 Prismatic Arts Festival was held in Ottawa from September 12 to 22. Some of the early programming for Prismatic 2019 took place in Halifax.

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