

## ***Shaking Up Shakespeare Episode 4: Outdoor Shakespeare – From Bard on the Beach to the Stratford Festival (and more)***

**Christine Horne:** You cannot be precious because there's gonna be a kid on a scooter wiping out right behind you when you are doing your “To be or not to be.”

**Raoul Bhaneja:** I had the experience of all kinds of people sitting down and being engaged with those scenes - forget the plays, the scenes. So I knew it could appeal to people outside of those more formal structures.

**Jamie Robinson:** And now we come to a reckoning in 2020 where, #inthedressing room, a number of actors had to speak out about the continuing problems.

**Melissa Poll:** The revolution is starting. I think we are at a moment. It's a very exciting moment right now where we're changing the way we do Shakespeare.

*Music.*

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Hello everyone, and welcome to *Shaking Up Shakespeare*, the podcast where we acknowledge, investigate, and query Shakespeare's enduring presence on 21<sup>st</sup>-century Canadian stages. I'm Marlis Schweitzer, one of the hosts of the series, along with Liam Lockhart-Rush and Hope Van Der Merwe.

This podcast was written and recorded in Tkaronto, the traditional territory of the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Wendat, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit. We're grateful for the opportunity to live and work on this land.

This is the third of three episodes focusing on the institutions that helped to prop up Shakespeare in Canada. In this episode, we turn to theatre companies and festivals dedicated to Shakespeare from small local companies to the Stratford Festival and Bard on the Beach.

*Sounds of an audience at an outdoor theatre.*

Let me paint a picture for you. It's a hot summer night. Children are running around screaming, playing. There are dogs barking nearby. Somebody's licking an ice cream cone, rather precariously cause it's warm, so the ice cream is melting faster than they can eat it. On a little stage, a group of actors gather, they're about to perform Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. There's an audience sitting on lawn chairs and blankets eagerly awaiting the performance to come. Sound familiar?

*Outdoor noises stop.*

Outdoor Shakespeare is not unique to Canada. There's outdoor Shakespeare all over the world, but outdoor Shakespeare has an important role to play in defining what makes Shakespeare Canadian. In the late 19th and early 20th century, for example, the open air movement brought Shakespeare to parks and other outdoor settings. This movement in the

words of author Sheldon Cheney, writing in 1918, emphasized “the value of outdoors as a corrective to an over-citified and artificial life, and it encouraged “the communal spirit with its democracy of seating arrangements.” Cheney noted that *As You Like It* was particularly suited to an outdoor venue where it would be, in his words, “accompanied by sunshine and shadow, whispering words and singing birds, and the necessary atmosphere.” Cheney’s words echo the anxiety of his era, most notably, the perceived threat of neurasthenia or what we might today describe as nervous exhaustion or burnout, a condition widely attributed at the time to emotional overstimulation and exhaustion from city life. And of course, Cheney was writing at the end of World War I. So in that context, open air Shakespeare was a salve to the wounds of city life, and it also served to democratize Shakespeare, at least in principle. Plus it was good for business and tourism, not unlike today.

But it's also important to note that the open air movement coincided with the implementation of the potlatch ban, a law introduced by the government of Canada in the 1880s to prevent Indigenous nations, especially those in the Pacific Northwest, from practicing ceremonies of gift giving, family celebration, community building, and performance. According to Section 3 of the *Indian Act*, signed in April 1883:

**Liam Lockhart-Rush (reading):** Every Indian or other person who engages in or assists in celebrating the Indian festival known as the “Potlatch,” or in the Indian dance known as the “Tamanawas,” is guilty of a misdemeanor and shall be liable to imprisonment...and any Indian or other person who encourages...an Indian or Indians to get up such a festival, or dance, or to celebrate the same,... is guilty of a like offense.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Now widely acknowledged as one of the more egregious forms of attempted cultural genocide instigated by the government of Canada, the potlatch ban was finally revoked in 1951. Throughout this period, productions of Shakespeare, staged outside and in, continued to flourish across the country.

### *Music transition.*

A lot has changed in the intervening century since Sheldon Cheney first wrote glowingly of the benefits of open air theatre. Today, many companies aim to reach a more diverse audience and take a more inclusive approach to casting. Some commission adaptations of Shakespeare's plays or stage radical interpretations of his works. Some even produce works by playwrights *other* than Shakespeare. At the same time, open air or outdoor theatre continues to serve many of the needs Cheney first articulated, offering a chance for audiences to relax and gather as a community outdoors in the summer.

And open air theatre has expanded considerably. Every Canadian province has its own outdoor Shakespeare company. There's the Greater Victoria Shakespeare Festival, Bard on the Beach in Vancouver, the FreeWheel Shakespeare Festival in Edmonton, Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Shakespeare in the Ruins in Winnipeg, Shakespeare in the Ruff in Toronto, as well as Dream in High Park in Toronto, Repercussion Theatre's Shakespeare in the Park in Montreal, Bard in the Barracks in Fredericton, Loyalist City Shakespeare in St. John, Shakespeare by the Sea in Halifax, Shakespeare by the Sea in St. John's, and Driftwood Theatres Bard's Bus Tour. And, of course, there are many companies I haven't even mentioned here. These outdoor Shakespeare companies bring theatre to

thousands of people across the country each year and provide employment for hundreds of actors, directors, designers, stage managers, and more.

Outdoor theatre matters and how it matters is significant. So in the first half of this episode, we look closely at the role that outdoor theatre plays, how it reaches audiences who might not otherwise go to the theatre. How do such festivals shape general perceptions of theatre in Canada? In the second half of the episode, we turn to a company that began producing Shakespeare outdoors, or in a tent, and is now arguably the most dominant theatre in Canada, the Stratford Festival. We conclude the episode with a conversation with Melissa Poll, the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion dramaturge at Vancouver's Bard on the Beach, interspersed with comments from two-Spirit Michif Metis artist Cole Alvis, an actor and director, and now casting associate with the Stratford Festival.

But first outdoor Shakespeare. Here's actor, director, and educator Keira Loughran on an early experience of outdoor Shakespeare.

**Keira Loughran:** I do remember seeing a production of *Hamlet* when I was in school, like in high school. That was in, I think Earl Bales Park, so it was an outdoor Shakespeare. And I do remember it just because the experience of going to the theatre outdoors and the environment and the night and the lighting and all of that kind of stuff just made me go, "Theatre's great." (*laughing*).

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Sara Topham, appearing in Tom Stoppard's *Leopoldstadt* at the time of our interview, spoke about how outdoor Shakespeare could be an opening for audiences who might never have experienced Shakespeare before.

**Sara Topham:** People who might not go to an indoor theatre, might not come to *Leopoldstadt* for example, and pay a big chunk of money to sit in a Broadway theatre and see a play by Tom Stoppard, they might not do that for a Shakespeare play either. But they will go and they will sit in a park for \$35 and have a picnic and watch *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. So I think that's a kind of really interesting differentiation: Shakespeare that floats theatre companies. Often a Shakespeare play is quite like *The Nutcracker* for a ballet company. A Shakespeare play is easy to market. You have the school thing, they have title recognizability. I mean, unless you're going to, you know, go ahead and do *King John* and then, you know, God be with you. But most of what those summer theatres are going to do is, you know, *Twelfth Night*, you know, I mean, *King Lear* is a huge tragedy, but it's recognizable.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** In summer 2023, Canadian Stage celebrated its 40th anniversary of its *Dream in High Park* with a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Jamie Robinson. Speaking to the *Toronto Star's* Joshua Chung, Artistic Director Brendan Healy estimated that upwards of one and a half million people have attended at least one of the company's Shakespeare productions in the past 40 years. For some people, Healy explained, it's the only play they see all year, but they come every year.

Dr. Erin Kelly from the University of Victoria similarly spoke about the value of outdoor Shakespeare for companies and the importance of building an audience that will be open to new risks, new challenges in the theatre company's programming.

**Erin Kelly:** Victoria, like a lot of other cities, has a summer Shakespeare festival that is outdoor, you know, on grass, and that attracts families, and that's a good thing. I will say that the Victoria Shakespeare Festival, the Greater Victoria Shakespeare Festival -- given that it is outdoor in the summer where people eat sandwiches while sitting in lawn chairs, and needs to sell tickets, can't just do whatever, really, really does need to be at least reasonably commercially viable -- under those circumstances, I think they make some really brave choices. I feel like I've seen with theatre companies in New York and with theatre companies in Washington, DC and in Baltimore and places like that if they've built an audience for a number of years, they eventually get to the point where they can put on something that's a more unusual choice.

And people will come, particularly if it's good - not done dutifully, but done interestingly. And so I really admire the Greater Victoria Shakespeare Festival for saying, okay, even if we are only going to do Shakespeare and that really, that that is their mission and I'm fine with that. But you know, a couple years ago they did *Cymbeline*. This coming summer, they just announced they're doing *All's Well*. It's a tricky play. I respect the fact that I think part of their calculation is, "We have enough history and we have enough of an audience that if we put it on and we do it well, people will come. The audience will trust us. If we do *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, people will come." And I'm not always sure that Stratford or Bard are willing to take that same gamble.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Another company willing to take that gamble is Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan, as Guelph professor Peter Kuling explains:

**Peter Kuling:** It's an outdoor company on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River in Saskatoon, right near what was formally the Mendel Art Gallery. So they had... for a little while it was not permanent. It's now since been replaced with a permanent octagon with a tent that can go up and all of that. But it was an outdoor festival that still was done inside a large tent. And oddly enough, this is going sound so silly, I don't think I saw Shakespeare there. I saw Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, cause one of the actors in our small town was from BC and he got a role as one of the characters in *The Alchemist*. So we all, you know, drove up to see him, to see Sean play in *The Alchemist*. But it's weird. I didn't actually see Shakespeare there. I just read all of it. I've recently been back and the structure's been rebuilt and now they have two stages and they're doing things like *Shakespeare's Will* and a few other things as well as an adaptation of *Cymbeline* with six actors from the university, which was really good.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** In this next section, we hear from the leadership team of Toronto's Shakespeare in the Ruff, Christine Horne, PJ Prudat, Jeff Yung, and Patricia Allison. They talk about what makes Shakespeare in the Ruff and their experiences in Toronto's Withrow Park so unique. We begin with Christine.

**Christine Horne:** You cannot be precious. You cannot be precious because there's gonna be a kid on a scooter wiping out right behind you when you are doing your "To be or not to be." Like it's gonna happen. There's gonna be a squirrel. People are gonna be eat[ing].. like you can't. So it's kind of amazing. You really just have to get up and tell a story. And I think that what was so amazing and pure about what PJ did... ultimately was like, "I'm gonna tell you a story."

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Christine Horne is referring to playwright and actor PJ Prudat's staged reading of her play *Otihêw*, an adaptation of *Othello*. On the night I attended, PJ enacted all of the characters accompanied by musician Alejandra Nuñez. It was a beautiful evening of live performance in Withrow Park.

**Christine Horne:** It was a really great reminder that that's all we're doing. Bring your blanket, sit around, we're gonna tell you a story, and where it can feel when you go often to a place where it feels like we have... it's expensive to go or there, it's all very fancy and there's fancy actors and it's all a bit like... we have to be so careful and we don't wanna like (*audience shuffling noises*).... Like all this stuff, and I get it totally, I don't, I get it, but you have to let go of all that stuff in the park.

We do have our site where we perform, but the possibility of starting way over there, like the, it can be actually quite, we could choose to do anything we wanted. It can be very expansive. It could be like a promenade, it could be anything. It can happen right around you. And I think, again, this goes back to, and maybe this is why it, it lends itself to why there's like Shakespeare in the Park, but there's not often like Ibsen in the Park or whatever, it was meant to be performed for rowdy, daytime, no lights, people who are gonna throw things and talk and who are gonna be right up in your face. It's meant for that. You're not separate. And even when we rehearse out there, people are coming and watching us rehearse, it's open as soon as we start rehearsal. I think it's why people do Shakespeare outside. I don't think that piece for Ruff is that different from other, outdoor Shakespeare stuff, except that we don't have a stage or we're not in a thing.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Jeff Yung elaborates further.

**Jeff Yung:** For us in this context now, as the new leadership, there's a legacy to Withrow. We inherited that and the nature of working in a site, almost like a site specific company, even though it's not like site specific in the sense that we go to different sites all the time... it is site specific in that it is in the park and I think because Ruff has always been in Withrow, there are gifts that being in that space offer the work, conscious or unconscious. And I think that we are incredibly privileged to work in, in a space like that with the type of work that we're trying to do. Everything is so present and at the same time it's very communal because even if you're not here for the show, you are a part of the show, or you are experiencing the show in some way. I think that lends itself to the work artistically, but the wider work of what we're trying to do, also in terms of building community and having the work mean something to the community.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Patricia Allison agrees.

**Patricia Allison:** Because of that legacy, there's so much of the community that's waiting for the Ruff show to come in every year. So much of the marketing is just that, like a couple is walking to the grocery store and they're like, "Oh, Ruff is back," cause they've walked by our rehearsal and they see our little sandwich board. And oftentimes it's the only show, the only theatre show that they'll see that year, but because it's right down the street from their house, they're walking over with their picnic blanket to see it. So yeah, I'd say like that 10 years that this version of the company has been there has also just created its own sort of community.

That a little bit is like, waiting and expecting and is fully on board with all of the wild things that Ruff has done over the years.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Ironically, the wildness and unpredictability of outdoor Shakespeare resonates with the early history of Shakespearean performance, as director Anita La Selva reminds us.

**Anita La Selva:** I mean, if you actually look into the history of the Elizabethans, the pit people were drinking and partying and having sex and taking a piss in the corner while they were watching Shakespeare, like they were doing all sorts of shit when they were watching Shakespeare. And also Shakespeare's clowns, they would riff with the audience, jump out of the text on a regular basis and riff with the audience and talk to the audience and banter with the audience and come back and forth. And then we'd come back to the regular action of the story, right? So audience behavior was completely different in Shakespeare's time. And I think we are stuck in a Victorian version of Shakespeare that I think came over with colonialism, right? All that Victorian version of Shakespeare came over with colonialism and it's kind of stayed in this country unless you then bust out of it and try to find different interpretations.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Outdoor Shakespeare, whether presented in parks or other outdoor settings, including city streets, can help to break audiences from their everyday routines. Here's Raoul Bhaneja on Company of Fools in Ottawa, where the performances of Shakespeare happened right in the center of the city.

**Raoul Bhaneja:** Around 1990 when as a teenager I was asked to join the first year of a company in Ottawa called Company of Fools. Company of Fools has been around, you know, now 30 plus years, but at the time, in its first year, we were a Shakespearean street theatre company. So we would do selected scenes from Shakespeare on the streets of Ottawa, either on Spark Street, which is a pedestrian walk, or where the Terry Fox statue *used* to be, which is beside the Confederation Conference Centre, which is now the temporary home of the Canadian Senate. So basically right beside the Rideau Center, the Terry Fox statue used to be there. And the way it was designed is that there were stairs that almost acted a bit like an amphitheatre and a flat space that we could perform on, and we would busk there in the summertime. I did that over two summers, and that's really where, you know, as a 14, 15 year old I was doing *Henry V*, the *Scottish King*, Bottom from *Midsummer's Night Dream*, Romeo. I used to do Bottom and I would do Launce and his dog from *Two Gents*. I learned then how many laughs there were in Shakespeare.

I wasn't playing those characters in a full sense. I was doing a scene, you know, I'm doing two or three scenes from *Mackers*, one or two scenes from *Henry V*, and, and we'd switch too. So, you know, you'd be Hamlet and then you'd be Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the next cycle. So people would get a fair turn. And the women played the men and the men played the women. Usually the women played men because there were more women in the company than there were men. We did have a theory and a mandate that Shakespeare was for regular people and that it was for the "common man," to use the parlance of that age, I suppose. And I had that experience again, being very young of you know, people on their lunch break from their civil service job eating a hotdog, or Joe Clark walking around with this kid sitting down on the step on Saturday afternoon. I had the experience of all kinds of people sitting down

and being engaged with those scenes, forget the plays, the scenes. And throwing some change in our hats. So I knew it could appeal to people outside of those more formal structures.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Peter Kuling likewise aims to make Shakespeare accessible to young audiences. He has recently been working with professional actors to create Virtual Reality or VR worlds for high school students to explore specific scenes from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. They can literally step into the character's shoes and interact with others. As he explains, his early experiences continue to influence his approach to creating environments in VR.

**Peter Kuling:** Growing up in Northern Saskatchewan, there's something about the way I saw it as a kid that I'm doing in VR to recreate it. And what I mean by that is there was no deal that could have me not have the Northern Lights in *Hamlet*. They are there in all their glory, which is what I saw growing up in the north all the time. And the Scotland, where we've created, for these witches is not just a desolate heath. It's got these beautiful forests that, sure are Scottish, but sure feel to me like where I grew up by the lakeside, you know, with the water and all these things, these vistas to look around at. So I'm trying to leave a little bit of my own experience and share that because I want people to interface with Shakespeare and share the experience. I don't want it to be instructive. I want it to be shared. I want that experience to be felt by all the students, by all the audiences for any project I work on or see.

*Music. Transition.*

**Marlis Schweitzer:** So far we've looked at smaller outdoor festivals, but this episode would be incomplete without acknowledging the tremendous influence of a festival that started out in a tent and now represents, for many, the epitome of Shakespeare in Canada. I'm referring, of course, to the Stratford Festival. The origins of the Stratford Festival, from Tom Patterson's initial vision to the raising of the festival tent for Tyrone Guthrie's triumphant production of *Richard III* starring Alec Guinness, has been told multiple times before. We've included in our show notes, a list of recent documentaries and published accounts. What becomes clear from these readings, and from interviews with artists, is the extent of Stratford's influence in shaping or defining what makes good Shakespeare in Canada, in determining what Shakespeare sounds like and looks like in Canada, and deciding who gets to play which roles, what bodies, what accents, what physical appearances can gain access to that stage.

In fact, questions about the Britishness of Shakespeare and the prospect of a uniquely Canadian approach to Shakespeare hung over the very first season. We'll begin with actor and director Jamie Robinson, interspersed with comments from actor Sara Topham.

**Jamie Robinson:** The legacy of the Stratford Festival in the fifties, coming over with Alec Guinness to do the first production of *Richard III*, I think it was, and *All's Well*. There was such a craving for British drama - that is real theatre.

**Sara Topham:** I have a letter, a copy of a letter that Tyrone Guthrie wrote to Alec Guinness in 53, or before 52, I guess when they were talking about coming to start Stratford. And he said, "We must not go to Canada and build them an English, like a British theatre. We must go and teach them how to make a theatre that is Canadian."

**Jamie Robinson:** And we had to ride the coattails of our colonial past. And we were excited about that because it was a colonial time.

**Sara Topham:** And as a result of that, because we had this company where there was an English component, Guinness, Douglas Campbell, Irene Worth, you know, these English actors who came over, and Guthrie obviously. But predominantly Canadian company and everyone spoke in their own voice, their own dialect, for lack of a better word. So, and that has stuck at Stratford.

**Jamie Robinson:** And then you get to late seventies, eighties, you know, the argument was at Stratford: do we really have to speak with accents? Because there was a time where if you didn't speak in an accent, you'd barely get a part there. So we started to find our own voice, our Canadian voice.

**Sara Topham:** So over the years, you could have, say Dominique Blythe, I'm just thinking to my early Shakespeare there, Dominique Blythe and Bernard Hopkins in *All's Well That Ends Well* speaking in their English accents. Bill Hutt playing the king in his Canadian accent, me and my Canadian, Lucy Peacock and her Canadian, you know, and we are used to that.

**Jamie Robinson:** And of course in the eighties and seventies, Canadian theatre was starting to have their own voice and we were getting new Canadian plays and Stratford was becoming a thing on its own.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** And as Stratford modeled a more Canadian approach to Shakespeare, its influence throughout Anglo-Canada continued to grow, supported by generous government funding. Here's theatre critic and Professor Emeritus at Brock University, Karen Fricker.

**Karen Fricker:** It's been an adjustment to be now based in Toronto and in Anglophone Canada and to see the existence and the dominance of the Stratford Festival, in Anglo-Canadian theatre production, at least in Ontario. And the centrality of Shakespeare within that, his works are the reason why that place exists. And it's certainly a great teaching tool, because to ask your students, why do we have a Shakespeare festival? Why does it get the most money? And a lot of students haven't, at least in their first year in our degree, haven't thought critically about it before. It's just always been there. And then to say, "Why don't we devote all of our money to Canadian playwrights?" always provokes a really important conversation.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Other interviewees spoke similarly about Stratford's cultural hegemony. Here's Raoul Bhaneja, Duncan Gibson-Lockhart, and Erin Kelly.

**Raoul Bhaneja:** And of course, you know, when you grew up in Ottawa, you were aware of the Stratford Festival, but I lived in eastern Ontario and that was southern Ontario.

**Duncan Gibson-Lockhart:** And you kind of see it like how respected it is. Look at the Stratford Festival. Probably the most, I mean, I don't know the numbers, but probably the most financed festival in Canada.



**Erin Kelly:** In some ways Shakespeare in Canada has become big business. Whether it's the Stratford Festival or whether it's Bard on the Beach, these are both really big, commercially successful enterprises that are interested in attracting big audiences, tourists, people who otherwise don't see a lot of theatre.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Stratford's reach, its dominance means that what happens on its stages matters not just in Stratford, but elsewhere. As York Theatre MA student Nassim Abu Sarari notes, this is closely tied to expressions of cultural nationalism.

**Nassim Abu Sarari:** What's fascinating is, again, this negotiation of who got the agency over Shakespeare. Shakespeare is this cult hero. I use the term cult phenomenon or cultural phenomenon. He is a cultural phenomenon, and his writings rather, are things to take and own, right? Because they're so good. They're so, you know? They're so deep. They bring pride to whomever is associated with English literature, with the English language. I mean, we can look at Stratford Festival as being an example of taking agency over Shakespeare or Shakespeare legacy, so to speak. Shakespeare is part of a national, or a cultural nationalism. He's like another segment that feeds nationalism, I think.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** The politics of representation have shifted over the last 20 years, especially with respect to race and casting, but not without the hard work and advocacy of many racialized artists. Here's Jamie Robinson again.

**Jamie Robinson:** My experience on how Shakespeare had to shift is that, when I showed up 2003, in 2004, I was approached by the administrative team there to address the diversity issues that were happening in Stratford. They literally, you know, rightfully or wrongfully just said, "We need somebody to figure this out cause we don't know." And they literally didn't know what to do about it. So myself and the other 15 non-white performers of 150 there, got together a couple times in that season and just started having conversations. We had conversations with board members as well to talk about these issues.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** For some racialized actors issues of access begin at the audition door. Here Keira Loughran calls the frustration she experienced trying to get a Stratford audition while performing in the Dream in High Park in Toronto, her first professional gig out of theatre school.

**Keira Loughran:** So it was a very, very good company and I was understudying stuff and things, and I auditioned or I submitted my stuff to try to get an audition for Stratford and in the company of artists that had gotten, that was doing the Dream that summer -- which was very diverse actually -- of the people who had applied to audition for Stratford, I was the only person in the company who didn't get an audition. And it was in the same summer, there was, the artistic directors of both Stratford and Shaw had talked about, that they didn't believe that non-traditional casting worked.

**Jamie Robinson:** And to make a long story short, in my time there, it took until I think it was 2007 or six or seven, when they did the first all-Black cast production in the Studio Theatre of *Harlem Duet* by Djanet Sears.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Dr. Liz Pentland also noted the significance of Stratford's production of *Harlem Duet*.

**Elizabeth Pentland:** Stratford has not had that many Black actors in lead roles over the years. So it's still a relatively new thing. I mean, Djanet Sears's production of *Harlem Duet* back in, I think 2006, was the first play at Stratford to be done, to be directed and written by a Black woman, and also the first basically all-Black play, in terms of cast to be put on at Stratford. 2006 - I mean, that seems crazy to me. But that tells you that that space for a long time was not friendly to Black artists, not a place that looked to create opportunities for Black artists. And thus kind of developed, I think a bit of an exclusive sensibility about itself.

**Jamie Robinson:** And those conversations back in 2003, 2004 is how we got to that place. It's not Shakespeare, but it was putting representation on stage. It was a fantastic production. And from there they started having the conversations about, "Okay, how do we tell Shakespeare in different ways?" You have to go through the legacy of, you know, tokenism and colourblind casting and we had to go through all that and affirmative action. I was in, surprisingly, another production of *Antony and Cleopatra* at Stratford my first season. And I played an Egyptian. I'm a light-skinned mixed race, Caribbean, European descent. I think I was the most, let's say ethnic looking Egyptian that was in the cast. And we all had to put on makeup, you know, tanned makeup, and it was just interesting, let's put it that way.

Got through that season and the parts that I got after that, ranging from an Egyptian up to when I played the Prince of Morocco in *Merchant of Venice*, where we're starting to say that the actor's identity is actually important to the part, to the role, as opposed to ignoring it. Up to that point, actors would be hired just because we need to check off a box, affirmative action, et cetera, et cetera. I was told by administration once that, you know, the reason I was at Stratford was because I was checking off a box, in their words a little bit more politely, they would think. But I obviously took that as a real turning point in my career and thinking, "What am I doing here? Am I an actor or am I just a box to check off?" Ultimately, I had to go through that journey and decided that I was here because I actually deserved to be there.

**Liz Pentland:** But that's obviously been changing, and has changed more and more rapidly, particularly in the wake of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter.

**Jamie Robinson:** And now we come to a reckoning in 2020 where #inthedressingroom, a number of actors had to speak out about the continuing problems that were happening within the administration in terms of their casting in roles.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** The #inthedressing room conversation was spearheaded by Black artists at the Stratford Festival. It began in spring 2020 on Twitter as a platform for Black artists to have their voices heard regarding racism and injustice that they had historically faced and continue to face in the Canadian theatre industry. In early June 2020, the Stratford Festival decided to delay their scheduled programming to give Black staff members and artists access to their social media platforms as a response to ongoing anti-Black racism. The hashtag #inthedressingroom quickly became a place for Black artists and theatre practitioners from across Canada to share their stories of racism and discrimination. These conversations have led to significant changes at the Stratford Festival. Here's Professor Liz Pentland again.

**Elizabeth Pentland:** But I think under Antoni Cimolino there's been a concerted effort to diversify the company, both in terms of the actors that are being hired and trained up through the Birmingham Conservatory, but also through the other creatives that are being hired, you know, behind the scenes. And I think if you look at the company more broadly, you see that the plays are looking much more diverse. The casting of the plays is much more diverse; instead of one Black actor or maybe two, you might have four or five in a play. You might also have some South Asian and East Asian actors in the mix. I think that, you know, there's a lot of creativity happening and a lot of thinking going into that diversification.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Nevertheless, some observers remain skeptical about the changes.

**Karen Fricker:** I sense a lot of things around that institution that there's a feeling that they must continue to, at least in part, deliver the plays, quote unquote, faithfully, because otherwise they'll alienate their audience. I'd love to see the audience figures, right? You know, who's going to see the work? Who is this work being made for? And are institutions that continue to centre Shakespeare, who are they seeing as their audience? I mean, I've seen some great productions at Stratford. I'm glad that it exists in that it employs a lot of artists and devotes important money to putting shows on. But I do have a questioning relationship as to why do we continue to centralize the importance of this writer in Canada, and these, you know, these are related questions to now with the death of Queen Elizabeth, thinking again critically. And I think there are a lot of people who are always thinking critically about why, why is this country still in the Commonwealth? Why do we still have the monarchy on our money?

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Such questions resonate with many theatre artists and scholars. Cole Alvis, a Two-Spirit Michif Metis artist based in to Tkaranto with Chippewa, Irish, and English ancestors from Turtle Mountain, has been an active participant in conversations about the future of the Stratford Festival. Here she refers to the Stratford Festival panel “Ndo-Mshkawgaabwimi - We all are standing strong.” Please see our show notes for a link to the video which includes “stories of endurance, resistance and resilience” told by members of the Indigenous Circle at Stratford.

**Cole Alvis:** There's a conversation that Stratford hosted featuring Indigenous voices, in the summer of 2020, where a lot of us had the opportunity to share our experiences of being at the festival. And within that, I put a call forward for the festival itself, inspired by the Kaswentha, which is the two row wampum, which is a treaty between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch. And what it calls for is for two vessels to travel down a river without interfering with each other. And this is an agreement that is ongoing and, of course, we know interference has and continues to occur. And so it was from my understanding of that sacred agreement that I proposed that Stratford take a look at their programming, and move towards, if we must, 50% William Shakespeare, the other 50% being QTBIPOC-led stories that are told and created by the communities of which they're about. And so this is in my mind a way... if we must salvage the Stratford Festival of Canada, how to do so that's more aligned with the sacred agreements that make it possible for settlers to be here in the first place.

And so while I'm leaning pretty heavily towards abolition and being critical of police reform, I will share that, next season, I have been hired as a casting associate, along with Aaron Jan. The two of us will be supporting the casting directors and the directors themselves, within the casting process for next season. And my understanding is that this came based out of

certainly merit that I have. I was invited to, to sit on, on some of the general auditions in the past. But also there's a play that they're considering for next season that will have many Métis characters. And so they're intentionally asking a Métis artist to be a participant, within that process, as again, I'll say a form of harm reduction. And so while I respect and understand the “burn it all down” approach, there are times where a predominantly white institution like the Stratford Festival of Canada can demonstrate that maybe it is possible for me to take a gig and to try to do some work within the inside.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Change is also occurring across the country at Vancouver's Bard on the beach, western Canada's largest open air Shakespeare festival where Dr. Melissa Poll is employed as an EI or Equity Inclusion dramaturge.

**Melissa Poll:** EI Dramaturgy is a new form of dramaturgy that is dedicated to enabling theatre companies and training departments to take quantifiable, anti-racist, anti-oppressive action in their work. That's how I'm defining it. So my work with the company includes many things: to identify and propose alternatives to the common systems and policies shaping Canadian repertory festivals that create barriers to entry or limit participation based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and/or age. So things like how accessible are auditions? Are we cutting people out cause we're not making them accessible? Or questions about what do we have in place for actors with children, how are we supporting them? And there's also actors who are navigating elder care, things like that. So those are new aspects of the conversation, but these are things that I want to work on with the company. I am also looking to document the protocols and practices in partnership with local nations, with which theatre companies can respectfully engage to amplify Indigenous voices and artistry.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** As Dr. Poll explains, the Bard on the Beach leadership has been thinking deeply about what it means to stage open air Shakespeare on land marked by colonial violence and dispossession.

**Melissa Poll:** Bard on the Beach is located on a spot that used to be Seṇákw Village, which was violently destroyed by settlers in the early 20th century. So being located on this territory that has just been returned to the Squamish and they're building a 6,000 resident district on that land. And so what is it going to mean to work relationally with them and to build those relationships? I'm not really interested in like a one-off, like “We're gonna do a show with the Squamish, and then we're done with that,” this sort of box checking, for me, it's really about, “Okay, how are we building relationships?” and, you know, we have to have trust and accountability to do that.

Another big job that I consider part of my job is holding the theatre company accountable for their anti-racist statements, decolonizing statements. I'm sure you've seen in the wake of George Floyd, everybody and their dog had a statement about Black Lives Matter and those are great, but if you don't follow that up with action and if you don't, you need to identify what the actions are. Like what are you actually going to do? And in a best-case scenario, you would actually say where you went wrong in the past, acknowledging sort of the problems. I think Stratford did that. And so my thing is, “What are the measurable outcomes?” And that to me is things like using cultural dramaturges, feminist dramaturges, knowing the land you're on and building reciprocity with those nations. I often see this work where people just will get a cultural consultant and they think that's their get out of jail free card. “Well, you

know we had someone Indigenous, so we did what you're supposed to do.” And it's, it's like, no, you, what is your relationship? Who's the design team? Who's the creative team? We have to be really connected. And then talking with the company about dramaturgical strategies for subverting harmful and regressive representation of race, gender, ethnicity, aging, and disability in Shakespeare.

So, how are we going to do *The Taming of the Shrew*? Are we going to do *The Taming of the Shrew*? You know, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Richard III*, and *King Lear*. Why are we doing this story now? And we have to know that. We have to know its implications for underrepresented groups, and we have to have a really good reason to be doing it.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** Dr. Poll remains positive about these changes.

**Melissa Poll:** The revolution is starting, you know, I think we are at a moment. It's a very exciting moment right now where we're changing the way we do Shakespeare and we're not modeling it after some English, perceived idea of how Shakespeare should or could be.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** You'll hear more about that revolution in upcoming episodes where we talk with actors, directors, playwrights, and others who are actively revising, reworking, and in some cases outright rejecting Shakespeare.

*Outdoor sounds.*

So the next time you sit down on a blanket or a lawn chair at an outdoor Shakespeare production, ask yourself, whose land am I on? Whose stories am I watching? Whose stories have been ignored, and what can I do about it? Thank you for listening to this episode of *Shaking Up Shakespeare*. Stay tuned for our next episode where we'll dig more deeply into conversations about Shakespeare's colonial legacy.

**Marlis/ Liam/ Hope:** Shaking up Shakespeare.

**Marlis Schweitzer:** This podcast is part of *Resetting the Stage* a five-year project that seeks to situate debates about theatrical representation and the politics of casting in Canada within a broad historical context, advancing dialogue with directors, playwrights, actors, educators, students, and other creators who are actively transforming professional Canadian theatre and university level theatre training. For more information on other aspects of the project, please visit [castingcanadiantheatre.ca](http://castingcanadiantheatre.ca).

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Thanks for listening to *Shaking Up Shakespeare*.