WISE WORDS from Facing Backlash: Performance in the Age of Reactionary Politics

Curated by Mariló Nuñez, Celine Daaboul, and Marlis Schweitzer

The following arrangement of quotes represents a small sampling of the many wise words spoken during the *Facing Backlash* symposium held at York University in April 2025. This two-day event aimed to engage presenters and audience members in reflecting critically on the Decolonization, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion work that has been achieved in the theatre industry since 2020, with a primary focus on Anglo-Canada. Co-curated by Courtney Ch'ng Lancaster, Laura Levin, Keira Loughran, Mariló Nuñez, Jamie Robinson, Marlis Schweitzer, Celine Daaboul, and Maya Fleming, with accessibility support from Natasha Ross, the event sought to identify obstacles, including experiences of backlash, that have interrupted or impeded the realization of DEDI goals and related initiatives; and share strategies for navigating backlash and strengthening the performing arts community locally and across Canada.

It is in response to the last two objectives that we have gathered these "Wise Words" and organized them into three sections around the following questions: What is backlash? How are artists and academics facing backlash? What specific challenges are they experiencing? What actions or solutions have they found helpful? We hope these words will continue to resonate with others in the days and months ahead. For the full symposium schedule and participant bios, please visit: https://castingcanadiantheatre.ca/facing-backlash-participants

What is backlash?

I was looking up the word "backlash." What does it really mean? Perhaps the best way to describe it is the feeling of being censored, controlled—of sensing that your very existence causes trouble, that your story is seen as provocative. I want to focus on the language and vocabulary we use. History shows us that every dominant narrative—every colonial action—comes with its own script. That script must be ready, written, promoted, and repeated long before the action takes place. For example, we are bringing civilization. We are modernizing. These people are primitive. They are savages, so it is acceptable to kill them. This land is empty, uninhabited, so we will take it. These words are rehearsed over and over before the acts of occupation, expansion, and genocide occur. Our role as artists is not merely to disrupt the narrative, but to challenge it—by telling the truth and bringing other stories into the light. … That's why there's a backlash against our stories, because they cause trouble and reveal the untruths about that narrative.

Rimah Jabr

So backlash, to me, feels like a very North American word, a very North American way of saying, "Oh, my God, we don't know what to do with this." This is now the problem that's happening. The issue has been there the whole time in Latin America. The problem started when the conquerors landed on that land. And so the backlash, you know, the revolutions that happen, are a kind of backlash against that, but they've always been, you know, tamped, tamped down and killed. So, backlash to me is about looking at examples from places like Latin America, Palestine, and Africa, and seeing how people have survived and thrived, despite their circumstances.

Mariló Nuñez

Based on what we've been hearing from colleagues at this gathering, we're now thinking of backlash as the social, political, legal, financial, and material reinscription of longstanding normative hegemonies against small temporary validations of existence/access to life for those minoritized within or who operate and exist outside the hegemony.

Jennifer Roberts-Smith and Nicole Nolette

Criticism has conventionally been maybe the most potent means of backlash against artists from equity-deserving groups. I think this is well documented at this point. Theatre criticism, as an institution, has helped to establish the legitimacy of the Canadian settler colonial project by validating its artistic projects. It's played an essential role in settler colonialism here in Canada, and critics have also demonstrated a really strong aversion to artistic risk and to difference. I think what's important to note is, just by, one, having almost entirely white theatre critics, and two, having these critics trained in an environment that has general ignorance about minoritized communities, but also being kind of trained in an environment like many universities, departments, especially right until recently, and other contexts that value Western art, that hold Western art, quote, unquote, Western art right up as this ideal, this perfection of art, and then don't know a lot about other forms of art, and then are platformed as kind of cultural gatekeepers.

Signy Lynch

And for me, misogyny is something that impacts all genders, and in particular, anybody that is not conforming to a cis normative standard of gender.

Shana MacDonald

"Our role as artists is not merely to disrupt the narrative, but to challenge it—by telling the truth and bringing other stories into the light. … That's why there's a backlash against our stories, because they cause trouble and reveal the untruths about that narrative."

I've been thinking a lot about this decolonial term, which actually is grounded in Latin America, and which, in turn, was very inspired by Afro Indigenous thinkers that didn't actually sort of—if you guys know, I'm not gonna get into that theoretical framework—but if it's worth looking into it, because it's become sort of a jargon in academia, right? And there was this one Afro Colombian, Afro Indigenous Colombian artist and activist, Adolfo Albán Achinte, who once said, "We don't need just resistance, we need reexistence."

Carla Melo

In terms of disability, it's hard to think of a backlash when there's so little forward movement to begin with. There's nothing to backlash back against. There's still not any sort of sincere gesture towards disability inclusion, honestly it still feels like it's coming from a charity model. (Disability wasn't included in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms until the mid 80s. Until then, any support for people with disabilities was based on a charity model, and that mindset persists.) There's no recognition that people with disabilities can create complex art with a sophisticated aesthetic through a rigorous process. I am often asked to consult with other theatres about accessibility, and what they usually want to discuss is audience accessibility. They're rarely talking about what's happening on stage. And so, of course, my first response is, you must put disabled people on stage because you've had wheelchair seating in your theatre for decades. And what are these people coming to see? They're coming to see a play that imagines a world where they don't exist. So, what are you doing to make your space welcoming?

Debbie Patterson

How are artists and academics facing backlash? What specific challenges are they experiencing?

I have colleagues who are running arts programs in the US who are now being forced to strategize about how they will scrub EDI-related words from their program websites to ensure that their funding is not pulled. They are learning that terms like "equity" and "inclusion" are okay if they don't appear together on the same webpage. For instance, if one appears at the top of the page and another is moved to the bottom, you can keep them both. However, if they are left to appear together (i.e., "equity and inclusion"), that becomes a real problem.

Laura Levin

You know, people are being deported. I know, at NYU, I'm going to meetings, and I've got my special phone with the numbers I need to call. Who would ever think that when I'm going to go over the border, I would end up in this situation? And so it's very, very serious. You need to have both going on: who can go and what you can do, whether that's giving your money, speaking up, or voting. Someone mentioned that artists make observations, which are noted with a pen. I'm too much in shock to know what the way is, because I'm so concerned about people's bodies, because in the art, that's the imagination. It is not real life. And right now, bodies are under attack.

Karen Finlay

I am the feminist killjoy in my theatre department who asks, "why is this a season of all white men?" In 2020 many theatre departments made a lot of promises around redressing historic inequities in our programming but now, five years later, there's kind of a feeling sometimes like, "well, we've dealt with it" rather than an acknowledgement that DEID is ongoing, active work that requires perseverance.

Michelle MacArthur

> "It's an art revolution. Make art not hate. Be public with your art. Don't take soul for granted. Our bodies are ours. Leave space for love. This sense of revolution that I am a revolutionary artist, and that the art, the revolution is happening now. And so, I am carrying out that art revolution right now."

[T]o me, the conversation around theatre criticism is defined by silence. I'm not sure I see an easy solution, but I do think that culture of silence is a problem, because it's so rigid.

Liam Donovan

You know, the great discussion about Canadian theatre, and nobody seems to want to just say, you do know that when you're sitting around talking about the glory days of Canadian theatre, you're talking about white theatre, right? Like but nobody all wants to say that. Nobody wants to say that when the Canada Council started funding theatres to tell Canadian stories, they decided not to keep giving money to Theatre Fountainhead and Black Theatre Canada, and therefore killed those two Black theatres because the stories of Black people in this country were not considered Canadian stories. People don't remember that.

Philip Akin

We held a Community Conversation in the fall to hear how people were doing and what they needed from GCTC as a cultural organization, as well as to narrow in on a dynamic we were perceiving. What came across so clearly in that session was that the folks who consider themselves a part of the legacy audience were saying things like, "We don't know if we belong here anymore. We're seeing work on the stage which doesn't represent us. We feel uncomfortable. We understand that you need our money, but we don't think you're considering our needs. And we don't want to be lectured to, nor do we want to be made to feel bad. The world is hard enough. We want to be entertained.' And then the young people were saying, "If there isn't an issue on stage, I don't know why I would come. It costs me money to get across town. I'm a student and an artist, and I have five jobs. My rent is going up, and I'm facing very real, material concerns about what everything costs, so if I spend money to go to the theatre there has to be something relevant to me." At GCTC we've removed a lot of financial barriers, but if the cost of transit is a factor in considering whether you can go to the theatre, affordability is still an issue. So, we're in this fascinating tension of everyone questioning whether they belong, while belonging is exactly what we're working to foster. We try to put out programming that is tacitly and broadly welcoming without being derivative pablum, while understanding that the company's mandate is to provoke an examination of Canadian life and our place in the world. So, to provoke examination is not sitting in comfort and having your values affirmed all the time.

Sarah Kitz

How are artists and academics facing backlash? What actions or solutions are they finding helpful?

Artists are observers—by nature, they notice. They see details. They see through things. Observation and critical thinking are valuable skills in academia and research, and this is where I see them fit in, serving society and the community. It's about posing questions; it's also about challenging the dominant narrative. It requires transparency, justice, and equity—and this is how I see it fitting into the role we play, especially in contexts of conflict or intersection.

Rimah Jabr

"The purpose of the artist-academic is to hold a mirror up to society, to reveal a truth of things. But, as time has gone on, I've realized that you don't need to be an artist to do that. You don't need to be an academic to do that; what you need is a questioning mind, and ideally, artistic and academic training is supposed to cultivate that."

It's an art revolution. Make art not hate. Be public with your art. Don't take soul for granted. Our bodies are ours. Leave space for love. This sense of revolution that I am a revolutionary artist, and that the art, the revolution is happening now. And so, I am carrying out that art revolution right now. And so, in that, there's a dignity, a confidence, and a purpose. And with the imagination, I am going with what has been done by social movements and by people for generations and 1000s of years. And so that is what I'm using, you know, the art revolution. But alongside the art revolution or the imagination is you have to get real. And the reality is that cultural movements often occur a little while after the trauma in our lives. It's not just an expression or a representation of those times; we have to go alongside it. This is where I'm thinking about it, and as a professor, I also realize that bodies are on the line all the time. So, I get very concerned about the idea we have. People have been fighting every day of their lives, in different bodies, in different situations and with other experiences. But what I'm hopeful for is that, despite the presence of art, life is more important than art. But life is meaningless without art.

Karen Finlay

I'm looking at activist movements and strategies of the past in a performance context. Thinking about the Civil Rights movement, ACT-UP, the Occupy movement, about how we use our bodies collectively in sit-ins and die-ins, marching and gathering, in riot and rebellion and rallying. Because what we are facing now isn't new. These are issues that generations of ancestors before us have faced. We are in excellent company. I feel fortified knowing that we are part of this baton pass and lineage through time.

Jess Dobkin

Instead of best practices, look for wise practices. Wise practices are "locally-appropriate actions, tools, principles or decisions that contribute significantly to the development of sustainable and equitable conditions" (Calliou and Wesley-Esquimaux 2010, 19). Rather than aspiring to be universal, as best practices try to be, wise practices are "idiosyncratic, contextual, textured, and not standardized" (Davis 1997).

Jennifer Roberts-Smith and Nicole Nolette

We need to have a more nuanced conversation about what the discomfort is. Discomfort can both be productive and also feed into backlash in ways we need to be accountable for.

Laura Levin

Modelling discomfort is not just about helping other people be uncomfortable with what we think is great. We have to get uncomfortable, too. We have to move beyond an idea of agreement or disagreement if we're hoping to get anywhere (i.e. building relationships that are about real engagement rather than about transaction).

Sarah Kitz

The purpose of the artist-academic is to hold a mirror up to society, to reveal a truth of things. But, as time has gone on, I've realized that you don't need to be an artist to do that. You don't need to be an academic to do that; what you need is a questioning mind, and ideally, artistic and academic training is supposed to cultivate that. I'm trying to do that by marshalling the work of everything that I was trained in, which is Shakespeare and the canon of Canadian theatre, but also I utilize the work of Indigenous scholars and scholars from the Global

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South, like Gloria Anzaldúa and Augusto Boal and Linda Smith and Jill Carter here in Toronto. So for me, that's what I'm trying to do in my work: to honour this idea that the Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house, right?

Shawn DeSouza-Coehlo

In the face of a retreat from a wider responsibility for making things better, it is vital we continue to imagine for ourselves what can truly accessible arts look/sound/feel like. What kinds of activities would be happening in these "just" future spaces? Without this imagining, we will always be subject to external ideas of "inclusion." We must imagine this different just future into being together.

Rebecca Caines

I think the system will make you believe that what you're doing is wrong, that what you're doing is upsetting the ecological system. And I think how we have to fight that is just to keep doing it. To keep fighting back, to keep programming plays by people of color, artists of color, regardless of the backlash, because the backlash is a demonstration of how uncomfortable the white foundation feels when it is confronted with its, what Rima said, when it's confronted by the reality of what they've done to build that system in the first place. We, as artists, are just like showing a mirror.

Mariló Nuñez

I think one of the biggest lessons I've taken away from [participation in the IBPOC Theatre Critic training] is that criticism is to be constructive. It is not to bring down people. It's not to shame people. Being critical is not inherently a bad thing. Still, it has been framed as such because specific individuals have had the opportunity to be influential, and the question remains: what platforms have they had, and what are the impacts of that? So, I think, just sitting with learning what it means to be critical, critiquing art, specifically theatre, and making sure it's constructive.

Amira Benjamin

I don't think *Intermission* is doing much to break apart the review form itself. But we have been working to dismantle the notion that a publication's coverage should revolve around one primary critic.

Liam Donovan

I was talking to a former student who's now running a theatre company out East, and he said that the only reviews he gets are TripAdvisor reviews about the region where his theatre is based. We need to move past the idea that the mainstream media is going to bounce back and start covering the performing arts in any kind of substantial way. That's just over. There are two, maybe three people in the country getting paid by mainstream outlets to write about theatre full-time anymore. We can't keep on bemoaning this. We have lived through an era of profound media change. Newspapers were 20th century. We're in the 21st century. We need to find new solutions, new ways of going about things.

Karen Fricker

We did something called an access rider [...] basically, everybody draws up a contract with their access needs and then shares it with everybody. And it's something I wish more of us did with each other in these institutional spaces, because it'd lead to a lot more respect for everyone and

a better understanding of everyone's needs. It's hard to hold all of that together. But it starts with understanding that everyone who's part of a collective has their point of view, and that when you bring it all together, there's likely going to be conflict.

Max Ferguson

I think about the phone tree used in activist organizing before the time of email and Internet. It was a way to quickly share information and plans. One person would call three people, who would call three more people, who would call more people. It was a relay — a network with wide spreading branches. I'm thinking about it now as a strategy to share information, but also to share support and check-in with each other. I'm interested in bringing it back, if anyone wants to join me in imagining that.

Jess Dobkin

There's a great project, the PLEDGE project (https://www.pledgeproject.ca/) that Rebecca Burton at Playwrights Guild of Canada and Barry Freeman at U of T Scarborough have worked on. They've created this database for schools to use that has plays by women and gender non-binary folks for large casts, and it's searchable in all kinds of ways. So, you know, as a feminist killjoy, rather than simply critique the work we are doing it's important to me to share those kinds of resources with students and colleagues so that we can strive to do better and program theatre seasons that better reflect the diversity of our communities.

Michelle MacArthur

It's important to have the team of people that you're working with every day on board in these conversations about programming and invested in a kind of collective community care [...] If there's any blowback, that is not for the artists to receive, that's for the theatre to receive, and the artists are, always, to be sheltered from that. They have done their piece on the stage.

Sarah Kitz

I appreciate space where there is a mutual understanding that you won't always get "it" right. You will, or I will mess up, and if we have set the parameters early, early on, then we are creating a framework to reduce as much judgment towards each other as possible if anything arises. And that's what makes it a reciprocal relationship. That's my notion, really, part of my notion of a welcoming space. It's when there's mutual agreement of those values.

Mike Payette

What would it mean to think about the impact and specificity of joy in the intersectional conversation that we're having today about strategies for working against backlash? What do we mean by joy and what work can it do? Is joy a political performance strategy?

Laura Levin

I think about ways of being with our bodies, our own and other people's bodies. Small ways that we can care for our bodies, care for each other's bodies, ways that we can touch and attune in this time that can feel so dehumanizing.

Jess Dobkin

The tagline for Sick + Twisted Theatre is "theatre for anyone with a body". Our goal is to use our lived experience of disability to seek sort of deeper truth about what it means to be human.

Debbie Patterson

It's about access, both for the audience and on stage and behind the scenes. And I think, I mean, the only thing I can say to that is that I think when we think about access, access isn't like there are disabled people in every community, you know, and access is really about looking universally, not universally in terms of like these are what everybody need, but universally, as in these concepts of disability justice should be how you operate within the world.

Angela Sun

I also said community meals. That's another thing I started doing. And people just relax. When you feed them, they just relax like you just have just one time in a process when they everyone gets to sit around a table and actually, without their scripts in front of them, and their shoulders, just kind of kind of go down, go down a bit.

Mumbi Tindyebwa Otu

It's impossible to extricate the problems of this particular moment from much, much larger social trends, attitudes, factors that define the context within which we are trying to do our work all the time. If we were going to say one thing about what that means in terms of how we move forward, the best thing we can offer is that we need really complex, diverse coalition thinking and action. So no one person, no one project, no one effort, is going to be able to even understand what the factors are. What we need is a whole bunch of people working in whatever way they can in a whole bunch of different places, and trying to figure out how to coordinate and remain in allyship with one another.

Jennifer Roberts-Smith and Nicole Nolette

Coming together. Being together will help other individual artists in their battles.

Rimah Jabr

And I would offer to model, looking to those that have come before, looking to our elders, to show what it is to respect those that came before and encourage that behavior, that practice.

Carmen Alvis