

July 22, 2015

## #REALCanadianTheatre

To: The President & Board of Directors  
Jessie Richardson Theatre Awards Society (the "Society")

Hey All -

We want to begin this letter by thanking you – our friends and colleagues – for the huge amount of unpaid labour you put into making the Jessies happen every year. We sincerely congratulate all the artists who were recognized with Jessie awards and/or nominations this year, and applaud the Society for its work in promoting and celebrating Vancouver theatre.

At the same time, we feel compelled to point out to the Society that we see an uncomfortable truth about the Society's work. With few exceptions, these awards historically and continuously represent the best of Vancouver's white theatre-makers. At the same time, the Society's stated mission is "to celebrate excellence in professional theatre and to educate the public about Vancouver's fantastic theatre scene."

We believe that by bestowing awards and nominations overwhelmingly to white theatre artists, the Society is – unconsciously but implicitly – sending a message that it is primarily white theatre artists and white theatre productions that are "excellent." If part of the Society's mandate is to "educate" the public about our "fantastic theatre scene," then it is our belief that the Society is doing a grievous disservice to the public by largely excluding work by artists of colour. And while we recognize this is in no way intentional, we see a historical pattern that is, in our experience, irrefutable.

For us, the composition of the 2014/15 juries provides clear evidence of the Society's historically exclusionary practice. **For Small Theatre - easily the most competitive category, in which the vast majority of culturally diverse and Indigenous productions are adjudicated - zero of ten jury members were artists of colour. Zero. There were also no artists of colour on the Original Script Jury, only three artists of colour (out of 12 jurors) on the Large Theatre Jury, and only one artist of colour on the Theatre for Young Audiences Jury.**

For us, in 2015, these numbers are intolerable, and we believe undermine the credibility of what should be a joyous celebration of our city's finest theatre. As noted, we believe that these exclusionary practices are largely happening unintentionally and without malice. In our experience, a way of understanding how that could be is to understand it as a manifestation of **systemic racism**. As folks may know, systemic racism is not the result of the intentions of individual people. It can be defined as policies, systems, rules and/or assumptions that perpetuate inequalities for racialized people. We feel both sad and encouraged by this: sad because, despite people's best intentions, it's still happening in 2015; encouraged, because with mindfulness, collaboration and effort, these practices, and the assumptions underlying them, can be changed.

Our best guess is that the Society is either wholly unaware of the problem, or – more likely – unsure of how to address it. It has been an ongoing discussion in the community for many years now; you may remember *The Georgia Straight* article in 2012 that addressed the issue directly.

We believe the reason why the actor, director and writer nominations largely shut out artists of colour year after year must have something to do with the fact that the directors of the Society, its Advisory Committee and juries, are predominantly or exclusively white. In a city like Vancouver, easily one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world, wherein the Aboriginal and so-called "visible minority" groups together exceed 50% of the population<sup>1</sup>, we believe this has to change.

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<sup>1</sup> [2011 National Household Survey](#)

We applaud this year's recognition of Carl Kennedy and Tom Pickett in the Outstanding Actor category. At the same time, we find it disheartening and somewhat predictable that their considerable talents were acknowledged for portrayals of that most stereotypical of disempowered (and therefore non-threatening) characters: black American slaves.<sup>2</sup>

Time and time again in many contexts, the recognition of artists-of-colour has been limited to the portrayal of characters who do not stray from a "place" of low status, who do not provoke nor implicate audiences into thinking about the ongoing impact of discrimination in the here and now. We believe these stories reinforce a myth that we live in a post-racial society, and do little to challenge some audiences' preconceived notions. Some people might believe that there were very few eligible culturally diverse/Indigenous productions eligible for nominations. We would happily provide a list of artists' work we feel deserved serious consideration.<sup>3</sup>

In our view, the exclusionary nature of the Jessie awards not only diminishes work created by artists of colour. We believe the history of de facto **white affirmative action** is equally a disservice to white artists. A system that excludes some means no-one can ever be sure whether the merits of their talent are being recognized, or if the odds stacked in their favour put their own awards and nominations into question. To paraphrase anti-racism academic Tim Wise, white baseball heroes of eras past – DiMaggio, Williams, Ruth and Cobb – benefited from the racist exclusion of black athletes from the major leagues, which casts doubt upon the validity of their records and achievements.<sup>4</sup>

On a purely practical level, the Jessies are valuable for marketing and grant purposes. By bestowing awards and nominations almost exclusively to white artists, we believe the Society is – likely unwittingly – perpetuating a cycle of systemic racism that disadvantages people of colour. For an example of more inclusive practices, we suggest looking at this year's Dora Awards in Toronto.<sup>5</sup>

It is our hope that the Society is open to asking more artists of colour to serve on its juries. We are happy to suggest people. We know professional theatre artists of colour who have tried for years to sit on juries, but whose offers to do so were not accepted. Our guess is this has something to do with social networks. It is common for social groups to feel safest with the people they are most familiar with. However, if the Society is truly committed to accurately representing the community, and celebrating and educating the public about "Vancouver's fantastic theatre scene," we ask that meaningful efforts be made to reflect the reality in which we live and work.

As caring, passionate members of this community, we would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience to discuss tangible solutions. We believe this is a great time to work together for change. There is a global movement around issues of inclusion. The Canadian Actors' Equity Association has just completed a national diversity census with an unprecedented participation rate; the Canada Council is transforming its granting programs, making diversity a key consideration; internationally, UK Equity members are calling for the implementation of quotas.<sup>6</sup> #OscarsSoWhite, #IdleNoMore, #NoOnesIllegal and #BlackLivesMatter were internationally trending social media campaigns. We believe there's no excuse for a city as diverse as ours to lag behind, and we are willing to work to help make this happen. We feel this is particularly important in the arts, a field that we believe should be leading the charge in challenging the status quo.

Renowned African-American activist and scholar Angela Davis said that racial segregation was "dis-established because ordinary people became collectively aware of themselves as potential agents for

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<sup>2</sup> Other examples can be provided upon request.

<sup>3</sup> There is also a legitimate point to be made about several high-quality culturally diverse or Indigenous productions being ineligible for consideration because of financial barriers vis-a-vis registration fees and minimum number of performances.

<sup>4</sup> [Home Runs, Heroes and Hypocrisy: Performance Enhancement in Black and White](#)

<sup>5</sup> We are happy to provide specifics upon request.

<sup>6</sup> [Adrian Lester Lambasts 'Embarrassing' Lack of Diversity in Theatre](#)

social change, as holding within their collective hands the power to create a new world.”<sup>7</sup> We urge the Society to join us in considering these words, and to work with us to move the Vancouver theatre ecology toward a more inclusive and representative future.

Sincerely,

Carmen Aguirre	Katrina Dunn	Brenda Leadlay	Marsha Regis
Dima Alansari	Lesley Ewen	Khaira Ledeyo	Paulo Ribeiro
Carmen Alatorre	Kathleen Flaherty	Su-Feh Lee	Carlos Riveira
mia susan amir	Wilson Fowlie	Kristina Lemieux	Sarah Roa
Sebastien Archibald	Evan Frayne	Milton Lim	Diane Roberts
Renelitta Arluk	C. E. (Chris) Gatchalian	Andrea Loewen	Joyce Rosario
Norman Armour	Christopher David	Minh Ly	Patrick Sabongui
Elaine Avila	Gauthier	Shannon Macelli	Loretta Seto
Joseph Bardsley	Rosemary Georgeson	Henry J Mah	Odessa Shuquaya
Kim Barsanti	Jeff Gladstone	David Mann	Troy Slocum
Stephen Beaver	Steven Greenfield	Billy Marchenski	Arielle Spence
Scott Bellis	Dennis Gupa	Mohamad Masri	Laura Suarez
Michel Bisson	Chelsea Haberlin	Broadus Mattison	Jovanni Sy
Majdi Bou Matar	Jordan Hall	Susinn McFarlen	James Fagan Tait
Nita Bowerman	Nicola Harwood	Mark McGregor	Heidi Taylor
Leanna Brodie	Darena Herbert	Ruth McIntosh	Agnes Tong
Diane Brown	Joanne Herbert	Caitlin McKee	John Emmet Tracy
Renee Bucciarelli	Jane Heyman	Troy McLaughlin	Fane Tse
Adriana Bucz	Jennifer Hogg	Sophie Merasty	Valerie Sing Turner
Tim Carlson	John Howard	William Merasty	Dirk Van Stralen
Tim W Carlson	Ray Hsu	Emilie Monnet	Hazel Venzon
Camyar Chai	Terry Hunter	Angela Moore	Kim Villigante
Pedro Chamale	Anthony F. Ingram	Allan Morgan	Lisa Voth
Vicki Chan	Celeste Insell	Carolyn Nakagawa	Lianna Walden
Judy Chan	David C. Jones	Lissa Neptuno	Jeremy Waller
Eury Chang	Obediah Jones-Darrel	Omari Newton	Savannah Walling
Rohit Chokhani	Josette Jorge	Irwin Oostindie	Christine Willes
Rena Cohen	!Kona K	Mindy Parfitt	Deborah Williams
Tricia Collins	Margo Kane	Corey Payette	lee williams boudakian
John Cooper	Andree H. Karas	Rachel Peake	Roma Wilson
Kate Declerck	Kevin Kerr	Monice Peter	Richard Wolfe
Charles Demers	David Kerr	Tom Pickett	Adrienne Wong
Jan Derbyshire	Martin Kinch	Linda Pitt	Nelson Wong
David Diamond	Alyssa Kostello	Christine Quintana	Todd Wong
D Michael Dobbin	Chris Lam	Brenda Racanelli	Donna Yamamoto
Jay Dodge	Joyce Lam	Martha Rans	Sherry Yoon
Leslie Dos Remedios	Colleen Lanki	Lisa C. Ravensbergen	Marcus Youssef
Stephen Drover	Amy Lee Lavoie	Jennifer Reddy	Raugi Yu
			Kya Zagorsky

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<sup>7</sup> [How Does Change Happen?](#)