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Black Plays Matter: Watah Theatre, Creating Safe Space for Black Artists in These Dangerous Times



Image courtesy of Watah Theatre

Overview

In her essay **Black Plays Matter: Watah Theatre, Creating Safe Space for Black Artists in These Dangerous Times**, its founder and Artistic Director **d'bi.young** explores the crucial role the organization plays in providing professional development to emerging and emerged Black theatre practitioners in Canada. Radical arts-engagement sits at the core of Watah's commitment to providing black artists with the tools to self-actualize, create relevant art, and uncover crucial mentorship skills for each one to teach one.

D’bi, drawing from the essay you published on the Canadian Theatre Review, I would like to start with asking to tell us about the residency programs that you are offering at Watah Theatre and the kind of artists you are working with at Watah.

At Watah, there are three main goals for the residency programs to work. First of all, resident artists must be able to introspect, reflect on their own humanity. Second, the space must provide a support to create the art that comes out of the artists’ process of reflection and introspection and then i think, third, the artist must be able through reflecting and creating art to lead other artists and people with whatever they are creating. That is the method that I created at Watah Theatre to work with the artists in residence. It is three main areas of study.

For the approach that I understand you have with resident artists at Watah, everything starts from the reflection on your own self as a person, an artist and a leader, is that right?

As a human being I am always trying to understand who I am and what I am. As a human being who decides to use art as a media, I am always trying to create art whether it is music, poetry, theatre or whatever, art that discusses my humanity and inevitably, by doing so, I end up leading other people. I feel like this model is not just for artists, this is a human model. Actually, it is a very old approach towards humanity. If you look at all cultures you will find some models which are similar to this, whether you call this self-mastery or self-actualization, or you look at any Eastern martial arts, or yoga, or becoming a professional or educated person really comes out of this idea of craft-personship, studying a method. I use my own cultural experiences to come up with a new way to spin this model.

Within this context, I do feel residency programs have the potential to be a new educational platform and model for people, I do believe this because the ways in which we are learning, the system that came out of the industrial revolution model – where you go to school, study, you get a job – that model is dying, and technological pace alone is changing that model. Innovation, which is essentially being an artist, is becoming more and more necessary. We have to be innovating, thinking and becoming makers of our life. That is art. I feel the residency model is a future model for education. I think the residency model is the direction because it offers room to be creative and innovative and experimental. It is a model where exploration of our humanity is central, we need to ask questions about our existence, which is the conversation we need to be having.

Since you were talking more in general about your perspective on residency programs, would you tell me something about what makes the residency programs at Watah theatre unique?

What we do is we do not work with artists but with human beings. When you go to a theatre school, you can become the next Hollywood star, and everyone is working to become the next super rich and super famous person, that is not our goal. The goal is to create how people can explore their humanity as a whole, and there are some specific goals that we keep in mind. One goal is to publish, since it is important to have archived works, because in writing your own story and creating you own worldview you document what you are saying to yourself – that becomes a part of what we consider the main stream. That is one goal, to arrive at a place where they understand art does not end in a vacuum, a world where we ultimately are all a part of an intersecting, interconnecting web. That is also a part of

the main stream. That is one goal, to arrive at a place where they understand art does not end in a vacuum, a world where we ultimately are all a part of an intersecting, interconnecting web. That is also a part of being human. If I am part of a web that action will have an impact. My artists are thought to believe they are at least a part of the world, that you need to be accountable for occupying a space in the planet. That also is changing outside. You can see that with people in Hollywood recognizing that what they personally do has an impact. We are definitely coming to an era where you need to be honest, where human beings are social beings and what we do matters, what you do with partners and friends matters and that will come back to you at some point.

So another goal for artists is to recognize they are accountable for their actions, that you have to be very careful how to act in the world, and that is what leadership is. Leadership is the ongoing process of holding oneself accountable for one's actions. If I hold myself accountable for my actions, I am inevitably leading, I am leading myself and I will, as I am, coming into contact with other people as I am thinking of my actions and how I am being accountable for that, that is the second goal.

The third goal is for the artist to take one step further and to actually engage in leading, to actively do that by choice. I am a leader, being an artists but also running a residency program, because my responsibility is not to die with everything that I know, but to propagate everything that I know. If you say I am a leader you cannot avoid leadership, so artists should agree to be leaders and then agree to teach. It is an old model, it is called mentorship and it became what we mean education today, which has diverged from the mentorship model and grew out from you being with parents, elders and the community and watching them how to solve problems because of industrial revolution. However, if we look deep into it, mentorship has always been a crucial part of the evolution of humanity. Mentorship is a natural human tool, it is not new, but I would like for the artists to decide that it is a part of their responsibility to mentor and that is how I came to the work that I do. Those are three serious goals that make our program different from the others.

I feel the work that your are doing with your resident artists is 360 degrees. You are not just working on the artist side but you are working on the whole person. So this is I think very different. One very important question is, you have been talking a lot about evolution and things changing. I am wondering how do you see things evolving in residency programs, from your experience as an artist and arts manager?

There are some very encouraging things happening, we have a lot of work to do but I am very encouraged by a few things. One of the most dangerous and damaging realities to humanity right now is misogyny and sexism, because it is impossible for you to be an advanced race, you cannot be an advanced race or species if members of your group such as women are under oppression. When you think of the status of women there is nothing normal about it, it is not rational, it is completely illogical, so I am very inspired by the fact that women are again rising up and that is really incredible to me, I think that it is a huge deal, I cannot believe I am seeing this energy.

I have to say there is much difference from what is happening in North America right now and in Europe. I feel that in North America after Trump's election many minds, many heads woke up and it had these consequences, you can see women rising up, which is something slightly different in Europe right now, there is a different social and political situation.

Yes, but you know also what power North America has over the rest of the world, if that is happening here, there is a kind of ripple effect. How can this affect residencies? One of the major examples is with theatres and organizations. All of a sudden they are trying to change their internal policies to make sure that they distance themselves from any allegations of misogyny, so it is getting into the laws of organizations, and if the laws structure begins to change, the systemic change amongst the people has to change as well, there is the potential of real change.

I am of two minds. I feel like for those who chose to work within the systemic structures that changes in the direction of equality. I think we still need to work on it, but I feel the direction towards equality is real and that will inevitably affect the rest in terms of residencies supporting women, indigenous people, people of color, because once you start with women's rights inevitably it will affect everything else, black people's, indigenous people's, differently able people's and queer people's rights. Women are very intersectional, and inevitably you are going to have differently able, transgender, black women and have a dialogue. You are talking about women's equality, and you are going to talk about inequality in general. That is what I observe in my own life. And so that for me is incredible. It affects the general fabric, which will inevitably affect residencies and who is admitted and get support. That is one mind. For me personally, as an artist and as an arts administrator, my personal direction is shifting because in the model that I am working within I have been brought closer to my humanity, I am studying my model and it is changing me, and what it is doing is sending me closer to the Earth, to the land, it is changing my priorities as an artist. So I feel like I am getting back to this old thing, mentorship, where elder artists mentor younger artists – and it takes a lot of time, sometimes many years. That is where I see myself going, it is a little scary, because I am coming from being an international artist, constantly touring, being out there, but this method that I am studying is making me quieter and quieter, and making me working very specifically and actually wanting to change my residency to look more like – you come to the forest, work some time and you study there, and you learn about yourself. That is more the kind of direction I am going, because that is what I need as an artist.

From facilitating international artist residencies in South Africa, Hawaii, India, Belize, the UK and Costa Rica to being heralded as a YWCA Woman of Distinction in the Arts, the creative endeavors of African-Jamaican **d'bi.young anitafrika** are globally celebrated. A triple Dora award-winning playwright-performer, dub poet and arts-educator, d'bi is also the creator of the intersectional creative leadership praxis, the Anitafrika Method. She is the founding Artistic Director of the Watah Theatre and the Anitafrika Retreat Centre where she life-coaches artists from around the world. d'bi addresses issues of gender, sexuality, race, class and the human experience through her vast field of artistic knowledge.

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<https://www.thewatahtheatre.org/>