

The Danger of a Single Story

by Valerie Sing Turner

Earlier this year, I texted a friend: “Wanna see a play with two black dudes and a white guy?”

Her immediate response: “I’m in!”

Not “What’s it about?” Not “How much?” Not “Where?” or “What company?”

I’m in.

This is how hungry we are to witness stories told from a perspective—any perspective—other than that of the white male. We are so desperate, in fact, that we no longer care whether a show is produced by a particular company, whether it is a professional production, whether we can afford it, or what the story is about.

As long as it offers an alternative to the dominant perspective—the white cisgender man—we will eagerly join the audience, reveling in the opportunity to experience a world that acknowledges some semblance of reality as we know it. The two black dudes turned out to be Tom Pickett and Carl Kennedy, both of whom nabbed Outstanding Leading Role nominations at Vancouver’s 2015 Jessie Richardson Theatre Awards (a.k.a. the Jessies) for their electrifying performances in Pacific Theatre’s *The Whipping Man*.

Race 101

Any discussion, initiative, or action about equity in theatre absolutely cannot be considered separately and in isolation from racial parity and representation. Whether it be sexual orientation, age, class, disability, or gender, all of these factors intersect with each other as well as with race. But as recent Vancouver productions seeking to increase opportunities for women demonstrate, a regrettable inability to perceive the *danger of a single story*¹ is contributing to a narrowness of artistic vision that continues to perpetuate racial inequality. Thus, it is an unfortunate reality that while it admittedly sucks to be a white female actor, director, designer, or playwright, it is six times harder to be a theatre artist of colour *regardless of gender* (Burton 11, 15, 21).

At its heart, theatre is about telling stories. Yet despite valiant efforts by many artists over the past forty years, our theatremakers continue to tell what is basically the same story from the same perspective: *the story of how white men dominate and perceive the world*. Most of what we see on Canadian stages is little more than a variation on this theme. Of course there are exceptions—beautiful, haunting, provocative, aggravating, and heartrending exceptions—and admirable companies dedicated to producing anything but what is currently accepted as normal. But just as Barack Obama being the first black president doesn’t mean that racism is over in the US, neither does having a white woman² at the helm of English Theatre at the National Arts Centre mean that our gender equity problem is solved. The statistics gathered through the recent Equity in Theatre initiative confirm that this single story has proven extremely tenacious (MacArthur 19–32).

The danger of a single story is that it makes us lazy as artists. We fail to question the assumptions of the play. We fail to question our own assumptions. The dominant story and its accompanying ideologies remain untouched, unexamined. Instead of doing the real work of digging deep, we tinker at the edges, perhaps dressing up the play in the latest hot concept, or adding a funky score. Kick-ass projections? Check. To-die-for costumes? You got it. Throw in a couple of artists of colour (AOCs) in minor roles, or, better yet, fill out the chorus with ’em. The grant juries will love it!

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Monice Peter as Polixenes in Classic Chic’s production of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, directed by Lisa Wolpe. Photo by Gaelen Beatty

Tokenism 2.0

I attended the opening night of Classic Chic's inaugural 2014 Vancouver production of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. It was impressively acted by a multiracial cast of women who performed the male roles passionately and convincingly under the direction of Lisa Wolpe, a white actor-director who has built a reputation staging all-female productions with her award-winning Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company. But the women who strode onstage were not Chic's original choices. Wolpe, an "international activist working for the empowerment of women and diversity on the stage," had to point out to the white founders of Chic that their originally intended cast completely excluded women of colour, and she insisted on another round of casting. Among Wolpe's choices were African-Canadian Monice Peter as King Polixenes, the friend falsely accused of having an affair with Queen Hermione; and Asian-Canadian Andrea Yu as Polixenes' rebellious son, Florizel. Anyone with a passing knowledge of American history would immediately feel the stakes take a quantum leap witnessing the danger of a black man falsely accused of consorting with a white woman; the fact that this black character also has high status and is a snobbish yet loving father added depth and humanity to the usual single story. And an Asian (wo)man as a romantic lead, playing against stereotype with his ardent sexual desire on display while disobeying his father, offered us a narrative we rarely see of Asian men in Western culture.

To their credit, Chic has apparently taken Wolpe's lessons to heart, as their 2015 follow-up production, David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*, was biracial. But, for me, the production was a hollow victory: white director Rachel Peake cast black actors Marci T. House and Catherine Lough Haggquist in the smallest roles, while every lead was filled with a white woman. One wonders how many minutes would be left in this *Glengarry Glen Ross* if only the lines spoken by the AOCs were presented onstage, similar to the way Dylan Marron edits Hollywood films to shocking and sobering effect in his "Every Single Word Spoken by a Person of Color" *Tumblr* project (Gajanan).³ In the eighties, this practice was called tokenism. And for reasons I am unable to comprehend, over the past decade, our industry has regressed to the point that white progressives are under the illusion that tokenism equals meaningful representation. It does not.

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen⁴

The Escape Artists' 2015 premiere of Tracey Power's musical *Miss Shakespeare* could have used a good dose of Wolpe. Lauded throughout Vancouver's politically correct mainstream press for its all-female production, the show's entire cast of seven was white—and not a single commentator noted that fact (e.g., Derdeyn, Thorkelson, Wasserman). My intent is not to criticize the women who were cast, which included Ms. Power; they were all skilled, committed performers. But I do question the artistic thinking behind the casting, and the self-congratulatory short-sightedness that resulted in effectively trading one form of oppression for another; that is, an all-white female cast instead of an all-white male cast. Were the producers so busy trumpeting their triumph for the cause of gender parity that they didn't notice they had marginalized women whose voices are historically more silenced than their own?

How is this an improvement over the status quo? And, more important, how is this good theatre? How is it to appeal and be relevant to Vancouver audiences, where the *visible majority*⁵ was measured at 54 per cent more than four years ago?⁶ With the casting of *Miss Shakespeare*, the unspoken implication is that only white women are oppressed by society, only white women suffer losses of children, only white women suffer the harsh consequences of illegitimacy, only white women have the gumption to rise above their lot in society, and, worst of all, white women only see and support white women. The danger of a single story is that we fail to see the possibility of other stories that have been ignored or erased from history because they were deemed unimportant or uninteresting by the dominant demographic who recorded that history. It is called *his-story* for a reason.

Even the best of us can have our imaginations blunted by a single story. The 2014 Arts Club production of *Saint Joan*, directed by a white woman, Kim Collier, was a strongly acted, faithful rendition of George Bernard Shaw's 1923 classic. However, while watching this show, I spent most of the three hours wondering just who this production was for. In secular Vancouver, where saint-



(l-r): Krystina Bowjanowski and Andrea Yu as Florizel (Monice Peter in background) in Classic Chic's *The Winter's Tale*, directed by Lisa Wolpe.

Photo by Gaelen Beatty



The all-female cast of Classic Chic's *Glengarry Glen Ross* by David Mamet, directed by Rachel Peake. Standing (l-r): Colleen Winton, Marci T. House, Michelle Martin, Catherine Lough Haggquist, and Suzanne Ristic. Seated (l-r): Corina Akesson and Christina Wells Campbell.

Photo by Megan Verhey

believing Catholics are a small minority of the metro area's 42 per cent Christians (Statistics Canada, "Immigration and Ethno-cultural Diversity"), why should we care about a white Catholic woman leading a religious war between two western European countries nearly 600 years ago?

It took me only a second to reimagine Joan of Arc as a Kurdish woman fighter in the Middle East. These fierce soldiers have a more fearsome reputation than their male counterparts (Dirik), and it is dreadful to imagine the unspeakable tortures a Kurdish Joan might endure should she be captured by ISIS forces for sins ranging from the wearing of men's clothing (as Joan did) to blasphemy of the "true" faith. Such a production would allow a Canadian audience not only to see beyond the submissive Muslim woman stereotype constantly served up by the media—an oppression symbolized in Western society by the hijab or niqab—but to participate in a valuable forum about the nuances and complexities of a religion that the Harper government shamelessly vilified as terrorist in order to strip away our civil liberties with its so-called Anti-Terrorist Bill C-51 (Fine). The danger of a single story is that it is harder to envision adaptations that make theatre relevant to our communities if whiteness is subconsciously centred.

#JessiesSoWhite?

Despite strong work presented by AOCs throughout the 2014–15 season, the Jessies were once again dominated by white artists. This is not surprising perhaps, since there wasn't a single person of

colour on the ten-person Small Theatre jury.⁷ There was also zero representation on the six-member Original Script jury.

It is bad enough that a supposedly representative jury of peers composed entirely of white people should exist in twenty-first-century Vancouver, but what's worse is that not a single person noticed that this was a problem. This means there are no systems in place to ensure that no one perspective dominates the jury's deliberations, and no criteria by which to address inherent biases. This is the definition of *systemic racism*. With that kind of white affirmative action built into the system, how can the Jessies possibly claim to celebrate the best of Vancouver theatre? Certainly in the Small Theatre category, it can claim only to celebrate the best of *white* Vancouver theatre. Even the deliberations of the Large Theatre jury, where three of the twelve members were AOCs, are not above reproach—25 per cent representation is barely a notch above tokenism. When there is an over-representation of one perspective—such as a white perspective—one cannot truly claim *meaningful* representation. In large cities such as Toronto and Vancouver, meaningful culturally diverse representation would mean a *minimum* of 50 per cent. At least women were well represented on the Jessies' juries at 50 to 75 per cent; most people would recognize the blatant inequality if the Small Theatre jury had been made up entirely of ten men. But that only serves to bolster my case that when people think about gender parity, consideration of equitable racial representation is practically non-existent.

As an open letter to the Jessies, dated 22 July 2015 and signed by 151 members of the Vancouver community,⁸ pointed out:

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 noone [sic] 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. (#REALCanadianTheatre Ad Hoc Group)

Some may argue that awards are not the be-all and end-all, but the reality is that a nomination or award can boost a career, whether that means getting cast in bigger roles or larger productions, getting a grant, or landing an agent. And so the same story—that white artists are better and more talented than AOCs—perpetuates itself.

"Wait a sec!" you say. "There's a hole in your argument. Those two black dudes, Carl and Tom, were nominated for Best Actor. What about them?"

#OscarsSoWhite: The exception that proves the rule⁹

Whether in the Oscars or the Jessies, AOCs are generally recognized for playing the role of a slave, a noble savage, a broken-English-speaking immigrant, or variations (and combinations) of those stereotypes with low status and no power. At the same time, characters of colour who do not require a white character to define them, who challenge the status quo and exhibit agency, independence of thought, and/or a perspective that exposes the lie of universality—a racist concept that perpetuates the false idea that the (primarily male) Eurocentric perspective universally represents the entire world's cultures—are wilfully ignored and literally not



(l-r): Carl Kennedy, Tom Pickett and Giovanni Mocibob in Pacific Theatre's *The Whipping Man*, written by Matthew Lopez, directed by Anthony F. Ingram.
Photo by Emily Cooper

seen as deserving of recognition.¹⁰ There are exceptions of course; there always are. But unless we are willing to examine and disrupt the usual patterns, we will keep spinning our wheels in the same unchanging ruts.

Now don't get me wrong: there is nothing wrong with stories that portray the struggles of oppressed peoples. They are, in fact, necessary for the dominant culture to understand and perhaps learn to empathize with those who are forced to navigate our systems of institutionalized racism and sexism. But they are not the *only* stories about people of colour. When such stories are lauded above all others, just because they do not disturb the comfort of the mainstream's limited experience of racialized peoples, *that's a problem*. It's the danger of a single story once again.

To get back to Carl and Tom, Vancouver had its own bizarre microcosm of #OscarsSoWhite, as both actors were nominated for their roles as slaves. (Neither won.) Meanwhile, Dion Johnstone and Crystal Balint, starring as Martin Luther King Jr. and

an angel, respectively, in the Arts Club's beautiful production of *The Mountaintop*, were snubbed entirely, despite turning in equally skilled and remarkable performances. The powerful cast in the Black Theatre Workshop and Urban Ink co-production *Sal Capone: The Lamentable Tragedy Of*—Letitia Brookes, Tristan D. Lalla, Billy Merasty, Kim Villagante, and Jordan Waunch, all AOCs—was sidelined, in my opinion, for being angry about the epidemic of white cops murdering young black men. Omari Newton's smart and funny hip-hop script—a hit with the culturally diverse young-adult demographic—was likewise overlooked, as was Diane Roberts' sharp direction. Both artists are black.

"My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit!"

Last year Alannah Ong was nominated for her poignant work as Supporting Actress in the Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre and the frank theatre company's co-production of *Ga Ting* by Minh Ly. Her nomination is remarkable for two reasons: first, her character, a gentle mother defending our progressive sensibilities against her homophobic Chinese husband, is, at heart, yet another version of the noble savage—spliced with accented immigrant—with whom white people can easily sympathize; and, second, she was downgraded to the category of Supporting Actress, although she was the only woman in an ensemble cast of three. *There would have been no story without her character*, so in a show featuring two Asian actors and one white actor, the issue is twofold: did the jury reduce her to supporting status because of her race or because of her gender?

The answer, perhaps, lies in the intersection of race and gender.

I was first introduced to this concept by feminist blogger Flavia Dozodan, who raged, "My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit!" In feminist circles, *intersectionality* acknowledges that we cannot separate multiple oppressions—based on race, gender, disability, sexual orientation—and that such oppressions are experienced and enacted simultaneously. Law scholar



Dion Johnstone and Crystal Balint in Arts Club Theatre Company's *The Mountaintop*, written by Katori Hall, directed by Janet Wright.
Photo by David Cooper

and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term in 1989, and before I knew what it was, I found myself exploring the conundrum through the lens of three personal experiences in an article I published in *Plus Zero*, a now-defunct Toronto feminist zine. The following excerpt from the zine wraps up an encounter with a white businessman in the Royal York Hotel's Air Canada office in Toronto in the nineties:

Once outside the office, I'm still fuming, questions racing around my head. Was it because I was a woman that he afforded me so little importance? Was it because I am Asian? Was it because I'm short and he thought I was a child? Was it because I wasn't dressed in a suit that he dismissed the possibility that I might have business there? A combination of all of the above? Or was he just an unmannered jerk, who would have behaved exactly the same way to anyone, no matter what their gender, race, age or socio-economic class?

I decided he was an asshole. (Turner 51)

Chris Gatchalian, award-winning playwright and Artistic Director of Vancouver's queer theatre company, the frank theatre, further underscored the importance of intersectionality when he told me that there was a time in his life when his primary experience of discrimination was as a gay man. It is a sad indictment of our community when, in the next breath, he says that after becoming involved in theatre, he feels more marginalization stemming from his Filipino heritage.

#BlackLivesMatter. Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Charleston. Idle No More. Carding in Toronto. White male strangers feeling perfectly entitled to accost me on Vancouver's streets to tell me, "Go back where you came from!" (I was



Alannah Ong and Michael Antonakos in *Ga Ting* ("Family"). Written by Minh Ly, directed by Rick Tae, produced by the frank theatre company and Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre. Photo by Raymond Shum, tempestphoto.com

born in Victoria, British Columbia, as were my parents.) Until we recognize and acknowledge that the single story hurts all of us collectively and simultaneously—including white men and white women—we will continue to alienate AOCs, waste resources, and lack the clarity of vision to make meaningful change onstage and *where we live*. The danger of a single story threatens the survival of all of us.

My theatre will be intersectional, or it will be bullshit. *What about yours?*



(l-r): Billy Merasty, Letitia Brookes, Kim Villagante, Tristan D Lalla, and Jordan Waunch, the cast of *Sal Capone: The Lamentable Tragedy Of*, by Omari Newton, directed by Diane Roberts.

Photo by Raymond Shum, tempestphoto.com

Notes

- 1 I am indebted to Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie for inspiring this line of investigation with her wonderfully charming and challenging 2009 TED talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*.
- 2 I have chosen to identify white artists by race throughout this article, following the lead of legal scholar Constance Backhouse, who noted in her introduction to *Colour Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900–1950*, that there is “a growing literature that analyses the tendency of whites not to perceive themselves in racial terms. The transparency of ‘whiteness’ is misleading and contributes to an erasure of the privileges that attach to membership in the dominant race” (9). By identifying white people as white, I hope to highlight the unconscious bias that assumes whiteness as the default position, as well as the double standard by which we tend to focus on those most affected by racism while failing to make the vital connection to the group that benefits most from systemic racism.
- 3 Marron graphically illustrates the complete domination of whiteness in such films as *Into the Woods* and *Noah*, which cut to black because no people of colour speak at all. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* is seventeen seconds long, *Birdman* is fifty-three seconds, and the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is forty-six seconds. Marron’s project also demonstrates how the roles assigned to actors of colour are primarily limited to nameless, low-status characters (see Gajanan).
- 4 Here I am referencing a *Twitter* campaign started in 2013 by feminist blogger Mikki Kendall that calls out white feminists for failing to support and defend feminists of colour, as well as failing to recognize that issues directly affecting women of colour are also an integral part of the struggle for equality (John).
- 5 It is a misnomer to use the term *visible minority* when more than 50 per cent of Vancouver is comprised of Aboriginals and people of colour.
- 6 This statistic is a combination of the Aboriginal (2.3%) and self-identified “visible minority” (51.8%) populations for the City of Vancouver taken from the 2011 Census (Statistics Canada, “NHS Aboriginal Population” and “Immigration”).
- 7 This is the equivalent to the Dora Mavor Moore Awards’ Independent Theatre category.
- 8 At the time of *CTR*’s publication deadline, there were 194 signees to the open letter.
- 9 #OscarsSoWhite was a viral *Twitter* campaign that drew attention to the whiteness of Hollywood when the 2015 Oscar nominations were announced (O’Neil).
- 10 A quick review of the Oscars’ recent record demonstrates the trend: Chiwetel Ejiofor was nominated, and Lupita Nyong’o won for *12 Years a Slave*, but David Oyelowo was snubbed for his wonderful portrayal of Martin Luther King Jr. in *Selma*. The character played by Quvenzhané Wallis—who, at age nine at the time of her Best Actress nomination, was the youngest nominee in Oscar history—struggled to transcend the inherent animalistic nature of her community, literally the *Beasts of the Southern Wild* of the film’s title. African-American author and feminist bell hooks has deeper insights than I regarding the racist stereotypes given new clothes in the film, which was critically acclaimed by white male critics. (The subject of white male critics being the arbiters of artistic excellence deserves its own article.) Viola Davis was nominated for her role as a maid in *The Help*, and Octavia Spencer won Best Supporting for playing—you guessed it—a maid.

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