



PROJECT MUSE®

Institutional Responses to #MeToo: A Conversation

Weyni Mengesha, Melanie Dreyer-Lude, Kristian Clarke, Kathryn Shaw, Jacqueline Warwick, Alisa Palmer, Frédéric Dubois

Canadian Theatre Review, Volume 180, Fall 2019, pp. 42-47 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/737338>

Institutional Responses to #MeToo: A Conversation

Natalie Alvarez, Associate Editor of *CTR*, hosts a conversation with administrators, artistic directors, and heads of programs from across the country about how institutional policies and cultures have shifted in the wake of #MeToo. This conversation comes with some challenges. It is difficult, after all, to take stock of the cultural impacts and effects of a movement that is still unfolding. But from within these shifting waters, the participants reflect on the changes they are currently witnessing in their institutional ethos and how these changes are impacting the relationship between training institutions and the performing arts industry.

The conversation features Kristian Clarke, Executive Director of the Dancer Transition Resource Centre (DTRC), formerly of Canadian Actors' Equity Association (Equity); Frédéric Dubois, Director of the French Section, National Theatre School; Melanie Dreyer-Lude, Chair of the Department of Drama at the University of Alberta; Weyni Mengesha, Artistic Director of Souleppper Theatre; Alisa Palmer, Artistic Director of the English Section, National Theatre School; Kathryn Shaw, Artistic Director of Studio 58 at Langara College; and Jacqueline Warwick, Director of the Fountain School of Performing Arts, Dalhousie University.

Natalie: I wonder if you could all begin by reflecting on the changes you've been witnessing in your own institutions in the wake of #MeToo. How would you describe the nature of this change? Was there a call for change, and, if so, what form did this call take? A striking instance of a call for change for arts organizations, at least, came in the form of an imperative by Heritage Minister Mélanie Joly with the announcement in April 2018 that Heritage Canada funding would be contingent on evidence of a "no tolerance" policy toward sexual violence and harassment. Did this announcement have an impact on policy in your respective institutions, or were policy changes afoot long before April 2018?

Kathryn: At Studio 58, we instituted the Canadian Actors' Equity Not in OUR Space! initiative on 2 January 2018, a day before the Albert Schultz accusations were made. We had been approached in the fall of 2017 by local Equity councillor Jane Heyman as Equity was looking to include the Not in OUR Space! principles in training institutions to create safe workplaces and the expectation of safe workplaces before students graduate. In the year during which we have embraced Not in OUR Space!, more students have been empowered to come forward with concerns about harassment and bullying. Some complaints have proved to be spurious. For example, one young woman complained about a roommate not paying their fair share of expenses. She was informed this was not something

covered by the policy and was given advice on how she might resolve her issue. On the other end of the scale, we have had one serious instance of sexual harassment brought forward, and steps have been taken to resolve the issue with the aid of the Office for Student Conduct at Langara College. Overall, the students have been very positive about the implementation of



Diego Stredel and Helen Belay, Bachelor of Fine Arts Acting Class of 2019, in a production of *All for Love* by John Dryden, directed by Peter Hinton, as part of the Department of Drama's Studio Theatre Series at the University of Alberta. Rehearsals for the production involved the work of Intimacy Director Jannine Waddell.
Photo by Ed Ellis

the Not in OUR Space! policy. Students have told the faculty and staff they feel the policy has given them the power to be heard and see clearly how it ties into the #MeToo movement.

Melanie: Our department has initiated two forms of action response. The first is to establish an ongoing working group to invest in educating faculty, staff, and students regarding what constitutes sexual violence, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination. These are three distinct but intertwined concerns that affect all areas of artistic education and practice. The idea is that the working group will not be a one-off committee, but rather a permanent ongoing group of faculty members who work to update training and awareness opportunities as new needs, new problems, and new employees become a part of our landscape.

One of the most interesting and potentially problematic responses has been the interest in intimacy coaching. This emerging trend is correlated to fight coaching in that a specialist must choreograph moments of intimacy onstage in order for players to be safe. In fact, mental health has become an important safety issue in the university at large, with our department serving as an institutional example of how to address those concerns in artistic practice (although, truthfully, we're still figuring this out). Intimacy direction evolved from fight direction in direct response to the #MeToo movement. Fight direction has always been an important part of keeping actors safe onstage. Intimacy direction became the component of fight direction that covers any encounter that is sexual, violent, or potentially emotionally triggering for the actors involved. While a fight director's job is to keep the performers physically safe, the intimacy director is charged with keeping the actors emotionally safe. Because this field is emerging and not yet fully developed, there is much debate about the necessity and value of such a position. For some veteran theatre practitioners, the intimacy coach has the potential to remove organic response and gritty spontaneity from a truthful performance onstage. Others argue that it provides safe boundaries from within which many things can happen. I am in the "watch and wait" mode, as I have little experience with this new position. I do think we must proceed carefully in our response to #MeToo. This new trend could backfire, and these issues are far too important. Weaponizing the reporting of sexual violence could set us back, and we need to move forward to a place where sexual violence no longer exists within the imaginations of any of our faculty, staff, or students. On the other hand, who could be against creating a safer space for all artists to play and create?

Kathryn: As far as intimacy coaching is concerned, the Theatre Department at UBC (University of British Columbia) and Studio 58 brought in Siobhan Richardson from Toronto in December 2018 for a one-day workshop in intimacy training for instructors from both institutions and UBC graduate directors. We felt the need for this workshop after several incidents in class where some students expressed discomfort with intimate scenes, one in particular that contained a prelude to a sexual attack. After taking the workshop, I personally feel much more secure in approaching an intimate scene with my students. This sentiment was shared by the other faculty members who participated.

Kristian: Canadian Actors' Equity Association (Equity) has been contemplating the pervasive issue of harassment and violence within the live-performance realm for twenty-plus years. A topic that was initially taken seriously only by a minority of professionals in the industry is now on everyone's minds. Back in 2015, Equity conducted a survey of its members, which led to recommendations on how to tackle this difficult issue, and one of the key initiatives resulting from this member outreach was the development of the Not in OUR Space! campaign. In fact, the campaign predated the revelations surrounding Albert Schultz and Soulpepper Theatre. It has been in place for well over a year now (after a half-year pilot project) and has been supported by engagers of varying capacities—from Stratford to Fringe Festival shows.

Natalie, you mentioned the directive from Minister Joly. In fact, the ministry, sensing something needed to be done after the revelations at Soulpepper, asked to meet with Equity to discuss possible solutions in response to the launch of the campaign. Making sure producers have appropriate policies and processes in place has been one of the challenges of this cultural shift. The industry is changing, but it takes time!

Alisa: We've been in the process of making substantial changes at NTS (National Theatre School) since 2013. Our focus has been on establishing transparency and accountability at all levels of the school. Some of the changes we made were inspired by the founding values of the school, in particular NTS's commitment to holistic training: an education that engages and nurtures the whole artist. For example, we expect each student to engage in shaping their own training, whether it's actively identifying their own artistic process or participating in their



Diego Stredel and Helen Belay in *All for Love* by John Dryden, directed by Peter Hinton, 2019 Studio Theatre Series, Department of Drama, University of Alberta. Rehearsals for the production involved the work of Intimacy Director Jannine Waddell.

Photo by Ed Ellis



(l-r): Cara Krisman, Kenzie Delo, Harrison Thomas, Jake Wilkinson, Simon Gagnon, and Rosalie Tremblay-Johnston in the National Theatre School's production of *Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht with Elisabeth Hauptmann, music by Kurt Weill, directed by Eda Holmes. The combat program at NTS, led by Anita Nitoly, helps prepare students to explore complex physical content in an environment in which it is safe to take risks. Photo by Maxim Côté/the National Theatre School of Canada

own evaluation. We encourage students to seek out physical and psychological support, and we provide financial support for this wellness care. We have a very active student association. I mention these kinds of things because while they may seem unrelated to #MeToo, they speak to the kind of culture we are trying to nurture, one where young artists are supported as they develop agency and independence. Abuse thrives in contexts where there is secrecy and dependence. While we can't ensure that students will emerge into safe environments upon graduation (and of course safe is a relative term), we can better equip young artists to expect to be treated with dignity and to have a few tools at their fingertips should they land in a context where that is not the case.

Jacqueline: This all seems critically important and valuable to me! It is so heartening to witness survivors of sexual assault begin to talk candidly about their experiences without shame. In this climate, abusers will not be able to count on their victims maintaining secrecy and shame.

Alisa: I agree. It's a very important ingredient. Some of the tools we've brought to bear at NTS include a renewed definition of sexual harassment as an abuse of power, to encourage students

to make connections and not to separate sexual harassment from other transgressions. We reviewed NTS's reporting mechanisms and have now engaged an ombudservice: an arm's-length counsellor to whom anyone, student or staff, can make reports confidentially and be assured of impartial follow-up. The ombudsperson meets with students at the beginning of each year, without staff members present, to go through the process with them and offer information. NTS shares its updated harassment policy on our website and has reached out to alumni, providing them with a contact to whom anyone can report abuses of power from any era of the school's past in complete privacy. The school needs to be accountable to its history in order to build a healthy future.

Melanie: The issue of finding safe ways to report is tricky. I've had students report to me but refuse to report to the admin. In the States, we have something called mandatory reporting, which obligates someone like me to report that an incident occurred but does not obligate the victim to file a complaint. This creates an interesting tension between the need to be heard and the fear of exposure; the need to take control of the narrative and the lack of control over who gets to know what when.

Alisa: There are some practices I've developed at NTS recently that speak more directly to the #MeToo movement. Early in each rehearsal process, we review the Not in OUR Space! materials (our production students and directors are well educated in these policies and guidelines), and the company creates its own Statement of Values, a document in the students' own words that identifies expectations of consent, conduct, and communication in the room. I've been so impressed by how articulate these young artists are about what's important to them. If they can put these thoughts into words at school, these words will be more readily available to them when they are in a professional setting. We have a very significant combat program at the school, and we're including a sexual choreography component, which will be taught across various programs. This unit will share approaches to sexualized content, with a focus on boundaries, choices, and agency, all ingredients that support powerful storytelling in a healthy context, a space in which it is safe to take risks.

Frédéric: Toutes les évaluations des étudiants se font en présence de deux personnes afin que ceux-ci soient en confiance lors d'un exercice aussi délicat. Pour ajouter au propos d'Alisa, tout le personnel de l'école a reçu une formation très claire sur la nouvelle politique en place. Cela a permis d'éclaircir nos manières de faire afin de s'assurer que notre approche soit idéale et partagée entre tous, autant pour le personnel enseignant qu'administratif. Les étudiants aussi ont reçu cette formation sans la présence des professeurs ou du personnel. Nous avons grandement simplifié les démarches d'accompagnement psychologique pour les étudiants et un *ombdusperson* extérieur à l'école est disponible à tout moment pour éclaircir des situations qui pourraient advenir. Le processus est très simple d'usage.¹

Jacqueline: I'm an administrator and a professor in a performing arts school within a university (the Fountain School of Performing Arts at Dalhousie [FSPA]), and I'm happy to see the growing commitment to creating safe, inclusive spaces for students to take risks and learn. Of course, everything in the academic world moves at a glacial pace! But we can certainly see signs of progress. For example, the student union at Dalhousie has been very active in supporting healthy relationships between students. Last year, they offered workshops aimed at male students in "rejection resilience," with the goal of helping students cope with romantic rejection without falling apart or lashing out. This seems like a positive step toward dismantling the models of toxic masculinity that make boys and men feel like their worth is tied up in their ability to dominate.

One of the great challenges in performance training is that performers have to keep their emotions close to the surface, and they have to allow themselves to be vulnerable in order to do their work.

Melanie: I find this challenge to be at the heart of the conundrum of using an intimacy coach. No answers here, just watching the process evolve.

Jacqueline: When we combine this with the kind of intimacy that characterizes performing arts education—particularly in music, where students form an intense bond with their instrument or voice teacher through one-on-one lessons—we create

high-risk conditions. In an effort to create a safe and supportive climate for learning, FSPA created a Statement of Principles and Values that outlines our commitment to "providing a safe, respectful, and inclusive learning environment at all times." This document states clearly that all members of our community are responsible for creating and maintaining a violence-free environment and that mutual respect and trust are essential. We post this document in key places in our building, and we attach it to the contract of any visiting director, artist, or lecturer. Through participating in this discussion with all of you, I'm thinking now that we ought to review it, collectively, on a fairly regular basis ... it is not enough to simply post guidelines! We need to ensure that we're absorbing and reflecting on the messages.

One of the great challenges in performance training is that performers have to keep their emotions close to the surface, and they have to allow themselves to be vulnerable in order to do their work.

Kathryn: In the fall of 2016, I decided Studio 58 should have a Student Advisory Diversity Committee to give feedback to the faculty and staff about diversity issues. From the first meeting, great interest was shown by the student body, and the students began tackling issues of importance to them immediately. After a few sessions, the organization and agenda of the Student Diversity Committee was put 100 per cent in the hands of the students. I schedule the time for the students to meet as part of our formal timetable. Besides giving the students agency and leadership opportunities, the committee has given them a forum to discuss issues they may have felt less inclined to tackle with faculty/staff present. In relation to #MeToo, the committee has presented panels on various issues that engage members of the local theatre community. One of the most profound featured women who spoke to their experiences of being directors, writers, designers, and stage managers in the profession. The issues of harassment and sexism were addressed by all panellists. The students were able to ask meaningful questions, resulting in an important dialogue about how to change the theatre culture, which discriminates against women and which has allowed bullying and harassment of women.

Melanie: Wow, this process seems key to deep, authentic, and meaningful institutional change.

Weyni: I started in my role as Artistic Director of Soulpepper very recently (January 2019), so many steps have been taken and are in motion already. The Human Resources Committee of the board has led the most recent review of the company's policies. Following discussions with artists, arts workers, and outside advisers, and the review of examples from other sectors and theatres, the committee has put together a new Code of Conduct and Reporting Policy, which Soulpepper adopted in September 2018. Within this document is a Statement of

Promises—a pledge that we make, as a board, as arts workers, and as artists, to one another and to our community.

Of course, policies are only as good as they are lived within the workplace, so this will be an ongoing process of reflection, but we've made over ten policy changes at Soulpepper, which include a Confidential Anonymous Reporting for Employees "whistleblower" hotline; post-production anonymous feedback surveys circulated to the full creative team; and anonymous employee surveys. We also review Equity's Not in OUR Space! materials at the start of every rehearsal period and ensure that intimacy coaches are available for all directors.

The company has posted publicly on our website about these and other steps taken, along with an invitation for feedback. We're committed to the ongoing work this journey represents. We have just started a Diversity and Inclusion Committee to make sure the voices continued to be empowered. Along with our internal work to open communication, we have also made it a priority to open a dialogue with the larger arts community. We had a community "Open Doors" event that was free and open to arts organizations where we created tangible points of access for the community to share feedback, have a conversation, and feel welcome in our space. We also held a panel for International Women's Day with five female artistic directors—Andrea Donaldson from Nightwood, Kelly Thornton from MTC, Nina Lee Aquino from Factory, Mel Hague from Rhubarb Festival, and myself. This is to invite the community to have a conversation with us about how far we have come and what we still need to do together as a community.

Natalie: In what ways do you see these initiatives, policy changes, and conversations changing the relationship between training institutions and the performing arts industry? Training

programs often try to differentiate themselves competitively by their ability to adapt to changing times and prepare students for the professional world they will encounter when they graduate—a kind of pre-existing reality "out there" beyond the campus. But I wonder if these Not in OUR Space! conversations are inviting new ways of thinking about the role of training institutions in relation to industry. Your comments so far are pointing to the ways in which educators and students are thinking with greater responsibility about how training institutions serve as active *producers* of new social possibilities, with the potential to model and shape the performing arts industry.

Kathryn: The effect of initiatives and policy changes in the training institutions will be judged as our students enter the profession. I believe they will insist on a more equitable and harassment-free environment in their chosen field once they are part of the professional culture.

Kristian: Yes, I definitely feel like there is a slow cultural shift that is taking place. Equity has had productive conversations with a group of training institutions about this very topic. Although Not in OUR Space! began by providing materials and support to members working in professional live-performance venues, we see our work expanding to include partnering with theatre schools on modifying curriculum so that it includes components that address harassment in all its forms. Several individuals in this discussion have been involved in those conversations. A real challenge is trying to push for changes specific to the live-performance environment while respecting the broader pre-existing, anti-harassment policies and processes that academic institutions already have in place. I feel as if schools like NTS that are singularly devoted to the art form may have more flexibility in navigating this change than bigger schools where live-performance departments are part of much larger academic institutions.

Alisa: One of the reasons I was drawn to NTS was the opportunity to affect the professional milieu. Rather than using arts training to prepare young people for the "harsh realities" of an unfair world, we have the opportunity to create a reality in our schools that is based on high standards of dignity, integrity, self-discipline, and self-motivation; a reality where inclusion and feminism, to name just a few core values, form the new "normal," and I agree this will transform our professional realities.

Jacqueline: I think this is crucial! Why settle for improving the culture of educational institutions when we can also strive to train future professionals who will be so committed to respect, equity, and integrity that they will transform the professional sphere?

Alisa: Institutional change takes time, it's true; however, amazing things happen when we're convinced of the urgent need for change. Are we convinced yet? When the answer is yes, things happen. And yes, there are changes at NTS that may seem to have happened quickly, and perhaps you're right, Kristian, NTS can be relatively agile given our scale. But when you look at how long so many artists have been fighting for basic values like inclusion and gender parity, let alone the expectation of a harassment-free workspace, the cultural changes we're discussing now and the changes we've been able to bring about at NTS



Rosalie Tremblay-Johnston and Qianna McGilchrist in National Theatre School's October 2018 production of *The Observed Flight of Birds* by Anthony Black and Christian Barry and the Class of 2018, directed by Anthony Black and Christian Barry. The exploration of boundaries, individual agency, and physical storytelling is integrated holistically into many levels of the training at NTS.

Photo by Maxim Côté/the National Theatre School of Canada

don't seem to be happening so quickly after all. It's more of an "it's about time" kind of feeling for many of us. Or #finally!

Melanie: So, I've been dragging my feet on this prompt because I'm troubled by some trends. I do see change happening in the academy. It can be slow and cumbersome, but I have witnessed several examples of no tolerance from upper administration when it comes to faculty harassing students (not at this institution but at my previous one). That can be a good thing, but there's also the issue of due process. We don't have that solved yet. The trend I'm currently most interested in is the way in which the intimacy coach has emerged as a kind of panacea to a quite complex social and interpersonal dynamic. It seems as though asking an intimacy coach to participate in your production process automatically creates a cone of protection for all involved. I find that dangerous on multiple levels. First of all, the intimacy coach phenomenon is brand new and still in development. We don't really yet know how best to incorporate this new position. And when we delegate protection power to one person on the team, we risk abdicating our responsibility to one another and to ourselves to make sure that all aspects of the creative process (not just moments of intimacy) are free of danger and oppression. My big question regarding the effect of #MeToo on the relationship between training and the profession is, are we changing the deep soil in which these behaviours grow and thrive, or are we merely lopping the tops off of a few weeds?

Weyni: I hear what you are saying, Melanie—so much of this territory is new, and we can't expect any easy fixes. An intimacy coach in a room does not equal a safe workplace alone. The institutions have to ensure that the artists feel empowered and have agency. I think ultimately we may not see a change in the deep soil right away, but I think the work happening is still vital to ensure the foundation for the next generation is healthy.

Kristian: Intimacy directors are a welcome addition to the rehearsal process. However, we have heard reports back from all scales of production about incurring yet another expense. Consequently, strategies need to include equipping all who experience harassment, both directly as a victim and indirectly as a bystander, with tools that empower them to call out/in unwelcome behaviour. Weyni's notion of agency really resonates with me. It is one thing to be taught how to respond to a challenging situation and quite another to put these tactics into practice when faced with a threat in our workspaces in which strong emotions surface. It really needs to become second nature, and by incorporating this into the curriculum, we fertilize that "soil."

Jacqueline: I completely agree that we can't get lazy about any of this: hiring an intimacy coach can't be a panacea that absolves any institution of its responsibilities to foster a safe, respectful environment. Performance of any kind requires a person to make themselves vulnerable; whether in singing, acting, or instrumental music, performers have to keep their emotions close to the surface, and that requires significant trust. If we want and need performers to offer us meaningful representation and exploration of human experience, we must provide them with the kind of community where they can take risks and open

themselves up. That requires vigilance and sincere commitment from our institutions and our communities. And it may lead to more brave, compassionate, and emotionally honest art!

Note

- 1 All student evaluations are conducted in the presence of two people so that they feel comfortable during such a delicate exercise. To add to what Alisa said, the entire school staff received very clear training on the new policy. This helped create a better understanding of how we do things to ensure that our approach is ideal and shared by all, by both the teaching and the administrative staff. Students also received the training, without the teachers or staff being present. We greatly simplified our student psychological support process, and an external ombudsperson is available at any time to address situations that might occur. The process is very simple.

About the Authors

Weyni Mengesha is the Artistic Director of Souleppper Theatre Company and an award-winning stage, film, and television director, known for her groundbreaking work and community engagement. Her work has sold out theatres across North America and the United Kingdom, and she was recently named one of the fifty most influential people in Toronto by *Toronto Life* magazine.

Melanie Dreyer-Lude is an American theatre artist specializing in international theatre collaboration with artists in Germany, Turkey, Uganda, Russia, and Argentina. She is a recent immigrant from Denver, Colorado, and was recently appointed Chair of the Department of Drama at the University of Alberta.

Kristian Clarke recently moved into the role of Executive Director of the Dancer Transition Resource Centre (DTRC). Prior to that, he was working with performing artists as Senior Projects Manager at Canadian Actors' Equity Association, where he took a leading role in creating and developing the Not in OUR Space! anti-harassment campaign for live-performance artists working under Equity contracts. He is also working part-time on his PhD in cultural studies at Queen's University.

Kathryn Shaw has been the Artistic Director of Studio 58/Langara College in Vancouver since 1985. As a director and teacher, Kathryn has worked across Canada. In 2016, she was honoured by the Canadian Actors' Equity Association with life membership. She has received the Career Achievement Award from the Vancouver Professional Theatre Alliance as well as multiple teaching awards.

Jacqueline Warwick is Professor of Musicology and Gender and Women's Studies, and Director of the Fountain School of Performing Arts at Dalhousie University. Her publications include *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (Routledge, 2007) and *Child's Play: Musical Prodigies and the Performance of Childhood* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

Alisa Palmer is an award-winning director, playwright, and producer who has led the creation of landmark productions across Canada and internationally. Currently Artistic Director of the National Theatre School of Canada, English Section, Alisa came to NTS in 2013 to challenge both form and content of our Canadian theatre and to expand the potential of our next generation of audiences and artists alike.

Frédéric Dubois, an actor by training, a director by trade, has been involved in Quebec theatre for twenty years. He has won a number of prestigious awards, including the John Hirsch Prize, awarded by the Canada Council, in 2008 and the Masque de la Révélation in 2001. He has distinguished himself across Quebec's French-language theatre scene, directing both repertory works and original productions. Frédéric Dubois is the Artistic Director of the National Theatre School of Canada, French Section.