



# INDIGENOUS PRESENCE AND INFLUENCE AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE SCHOOL OF CANADA

CONSOLIDATED FINDINGS FOR DISTRIBUTION

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with support from  
The National Theatre School's  
Indigenous Advisory Circle



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## PREPARATORY PROCESS

The initial stage of this project involved assessing and translating a report of the program between Ondinnok and The National Theatre School of Canada (NTS), identifying the participants of the program, selecting candidates and reaching out to them for interviews. However, we decided to go further back in time to review and update all educational relationships between Indigenous people and NTS. The process continued with Indigenous students and students with Indigenous ancestry who had graduated from The National Theatre School of Canada, as well as faculty and Indigenous Artists in Residence.

Of the Indigenous students, faculty and Indigenous Artists in Residence identified, twenty were selected as potential candidates for interviews, and thirteen candidates were available. The selection process was created to ensure that there were participants from all four directions: North, South, East and West, as well as different Nations with varying cultural identities.

The next step involved drafting interview questions. Some were student-centric, others faculty-centric, and the majority could be asked to any participant. The questions varied from participant to participant, based on their relationship to the School. Participants answered multiple questions at a time, resulting in multiple questions being listed in some interviews.

The interviews were anonymous and confidential and were conducted by phone to eliminate Internet connection issues. The answers were written on paper, typed into the full report, then destroyed. Names of specific faculty members, both past and present, were redacted to preserve participants' anonymity.

This process took longer than previously expected due, in part, to the prolonged Covid-19 pandemic, which affected many of the participants' schedules.

This project relates directly to the "Seven Generations" teachings, which specify that Nations and individuals must think of the seven generations before them and the seven generations after them in their conduct. This honours those who have gone before and, as we work to Indigenize spaces, ensures the survival of future generations.

## SUMMARY

The summary presented in this report is taken from the more extensive findings entitled “Indigenous Presence and Influence at the National Theatre School of Canada.” It aims to guide the organization toward a more inclusive practice for Indigenous students and faculty, from initial outreach through to graduation.

As the National Theatre School embarks on a strategic plan to actively engage Indigenous presence in the School, we hope that this information will support its evolution toward a better student and faculty experience for Indigenous people.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The National Theatre School was created, in part, as a response to the recommendations of the 1951 Letters and Sciences report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, known as the Massey Report. The report stated the following:

“...since the death of true Indian arts is inevitable, Indians should not be encouraged to prolong the existence of arts which at best must be artificial and at worst are degenerate. [...] The impact of the white man with his more advanced civilization and his infinitely superior techniques resulted in the gradual destruction of the Indian way of life. The Indian arts thus survive only as ghosts or shadows of a dead society. They can never, it is said, regain real form or substance. Indians with creative talent should therefore develop it as other Canadians do, and should receive every encouragement for this purpose; but Indian art as such cannot be revived.”

And yet, it also recommended that

“...there is general agreement that help, though essential, must be given with much care; otherwise it may do harm, rather than good. The Indians should be reminded of the value of their own traditions and the beauty of their traditional designs but should be free to work in the form and pattern which they prefer.”

Confusing? Yes. But it’s also true to the unconscious bias of the time that still prevails today. The underlying determination remains rooted in the desire to have Indigenous peoples comply with, assimilate into and find a place in colonial society, while remaining open to that very same society’s reminder of their worth and value. The larger question is: How can Indigenous people remain “free to work in the form and pattern which they prefer” within the constructs of the colonial structures and ways of working in which our training institutions are deeply rooted?

## TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE

While it can be argued that the entire student body’s first impressions of the School can be identified as “daunting” and “terrifying,” what makes the Indigenous student experience unique is that Indigenous artists today still feel the foundation of unconscious bias laid down in the Massey Report. Some, in fact, identified their first impressions of the School as intimidating, had

little hope of being accepted or felt that NTS wasn't a place for them.

The essential takeaway from the Massey Report is that help can do as much harm as it can do good. We recommend that students receive plenty of information about the program's content prior to their arrival. And the only way to be specific with Indigenous students about what the School can offer them is to be clear about how they will be integrated into the program and what resources will be available to them.

Generalities are no longer enough. The School must better understand its specific offer and both its past and current relationship with Indigenous peoples. To move forward, we must have the courage to examine the past. Then we can truly learn how to do things better. Specifically, a program and attempted partnership was established in 2005 between Ondinnok and NTS.<sup>1</sup> This project ended abruptly.

While information on the rollout of this initiative and its curriculum exists, our further research into the ins and outs led to a dead end: fortunately, it was no surprise that most NTS alumni and management were unaware of the nature of the program. We suggest that the document continue to be analyzed by the Indigenous Advisory Circle to further understand what was being proposed and how this initiative could possibly be reintegrated into the NTS educational structure (with changes).

No doubt one of the biggest challenges in attracting Indigenous students is recruitment. Most of the recent Indigenous students heard about the School from high school or university programs they were enrolled in. While it is true that there are more Indigenous students graduating from high school than ever before, the per capita ratio of Indigenous students attending postsecondary programs is still below the national average. So, what does outreach mean and how can it be achieved?

Developing a relationship with the Indigenous community should be seen not only as an urgent priority, but also as a long-term goal. Rebuilding trust with Indigenous peoples will take time. One of the best ways to develop that relationship is to ensure that Indigenous Elders are available and seen as an important part of the School. While it's also true that they should be involved in discussions around strategic planning to truly reflect how Indigenous governance could be woven into the fabric of the School, an Elder's participation will be instrumental in ensuring that the history and knowledge of the territory can be integrated. This, in turn, will create a ripple effect that will ultimately show prospective Indigenous students that the School is accessible to them, that their perspective is honoured and that there is a community to support them. In addition, better understanding their needs will help shift the artistic training content, resulting in a more appealing program to prospective students and faculty. The Indigenous Advisory Circle is part of that overall trajectory, but at the root of Indigenous communities are the Elders and knowledge keepers that guide us all. A booth at Pow Wows, both on and off reserves, would also be a great way to get the word out.

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to the separate document [NTS\\_Indigenous\\_Report\\_Ondinnok\\_EN-FR](#)

For many Indigenous youth, access to economic stability and the arts in general is challenging. The few that are able to audition and make it to NTS' call-back process are aware that they have had exposure to Western theatre or theatre training that many of their counterparts did not. This imbalance has been created by a system that is still very much based on systemic racism. It's particularly telling that very few Inuit, who have even less access to Western theatre structures and content, have even applied to the School since its foundation. While the administrative process is straightforward and supportive, the details of the program are vague and leave some doubt as to how they would or could fit into the program.

There is a myriad of myths regarding Indigenous students having access to education funding. It is a very complicated system based on government recommendations and only accessible to Indigenous students with band enrollment and status cards. Even then, the arts are not a government priority when it comes to band council education funding. So, for many Indigenous students, especially those who are travelling from the north where a plane ticket from Nunavut to Montreal can cost as much as \$2,000, financial insecurity is a huge obstacle to even participating in the audition process. If the goal is to support every potential student so that they can fully participate in the call-back process, then it is essential to consider how they can do so without financial stress.

It is promising to note that attitudes around disclosing Indigenous identity have shifted. As recently as 10 years ago, it was felt that identifying as Indigenous was detrimental for fear of its impact on casting and acceptance and the other students' general attitude. But now, more and more students are embracing their Indigeneity with pride. Our hope is that we can continue to encourage that disclosure and support those who have been disconnected from their community as a result of colonial oppression.

Also promising is the fact that in the last few years there has been an increase in the number of faculty members who are IBPOC, although very few of them are Indigenous. And when there are Indigenous faculty members, the division between the two sections does not always let all Indigenous students participate, as the colonial structure of French vs. English perpetuates a divide in the creation of Indigenous community within the School.

The moments when cultural identity is affirmed and, in some cases, celebrated are key to a positive experience for Indigenous students. These include everything from regularly meeting with all Indigenous students and faculty at the School, experiencing Indigenous pedagogy through the training, reading material from Indigenous writers, having the opportunity to layer Indigeneity into existing characters not originally written from that perspective and discussing the integration of culturally significant pieces into design with costume designers. The solo project has also been identified as a place where, with more focus and support, individual Indigeneity could potentially be celebrated.

Adaptation and how it can support inclusion and different perspectives is another exciting area to explore.

To some extent, most students at the School experience loneliness, isolation, separation from family, etc. The fundamental difference is that there is very little cultural support for Indigenous

students as there is rarely more than one per cohort. This affirms the need for regular Indigenous community meetings that should be scheduled within the pedagogical day and not be considered as extra-curricular or above and beyond the need for socialization. This kind of support within the cohort also makes it everyone's responsibility to call out anti-Indigenous behaviour, rather than solely one person's. Not all Indigenous people get along and no assumptions should be made that they will just because they are in the same cohort. On the other hand, having another Indigenous person in your cohort eliminates the emotional and psychological burden of being "the only one."

In a world where Indigenous issues are beginning to be heard and society is waking up to the challenges Indigenous peoples face, a large part of Canada remains unaware. When entering a PWI (predominantly white institution), Indigenous students are required to not only be a student but also an educator to other students and, in some cases, faculty.

A larger question that needs to be considered is who bears the responsibility to bring in Indigenous content, especially if there is no Indigenous faculty teaching at the School. In the case of the program created with Ondinnok, the participants developed the content themselves. Most Indigenous students have never, in the history of NTS, engaged with Indigenous content at the School. And if they did, it was their responsibility to bring in the material. The fact remains that in the few instances where Indigenous content was introduced, the students were able to see themselves reflected in the work and this enabled them to express themselves in a way they hadn't had the chance to up until that point. But bringing in Indigenous material is not enough. The work needs to be supported by research and understanding of the material, guided discussions about issues within the works with knowledgeable members of the community, and a system for discussing potential anti-Indigenous sentiments brought to light throughout the process. In one instance, the class discussing Indigenous content was led by a non-Indigenous person who did not have the context and understanding of the material to properly facilitate discussion. The fact that most Indigenous students at NTS have never had the chance to work on material by Indigenous writers is significant and cannot be emphasized enough.

The French section had, in March 2018, scheduled a conference with Robert Lepage. Then came the Slav and Kanata events during the summer. The invitation was maintained, yet without considering the full impact that Robert Lepage's presence might have on the students and the internal and national Indigenous community. The timing was unfortunate and did little to make Indigenous students feel that NTS was a safe space. It also prompted discussions at the national level with Indigenous artists who had no previous relationship with the School. This singular event did nothing to encourage appreciation of NTS within the Indigenous community at large. At the very least, extensive, School-wide discussions about his visit would have been helpful. Consequently, it is suggested that these types of invitations, if they are repeated, be better supervised by the institution, both with regards to the event itself as well as subsequent conversations.

While we like to think that we are an enlightened society and that NTS is generally free from the shackles of racism, we are largely unaware of the targeted remarks towards Indigenous students and students of colour that are uttered in the School's locker rooms and hallways. The Indigenous

Advisory Circle continues to advocate for appreciation through education, but the truth is that racism is deeply ingrained in the Canadian consciousness and there is still much work to do—even at NTS. Indigenous history and culture classes in the School’s French sector have been identified as particularly important.

We cannot lose sight of the substantial gains, however. Going from fear of disclosing Indigenous identity to large groups participating in smudging ceremonies has brought about a huge shift in perspective. This initiative will grow and it will hopefully be commonplace in everyone’s daily experience by next year. The next big challenge will be to educate students and administration so that the responsibility for creating land acknowledgements does not fall on the shoulders of Indigenous students alone.

The current initiatives integrating Indigenous artistic practices to help braid the English and French sections together and to allow all students in the School to work hand-in-hand toward building awareness and unity have received favourable reviews. This can be explored further, and the Indigenous Advisory Circle will be making more recommendations in the coming months to strengthen this practice.

In the meantime, lack of financial stability and the increasing difficulty finding affordable housing near the St. Denis campus is a large barrier to Indigenous participation at the School, as it is to most NTS students. Most Indigenous students coming to NTS have a connection with or are already based in urban environments, largely because of the lack of access to high school education on reserves. NTS will need to raise awareness and increase understanding of the fact that the Indigenous student experience is not monolithic. To some degree, government policies around displacement and assimilation have been successful, and it should be understood that each Indigenous student engages in the School with a personal and unique connection to their community.

To support the work that the Indigenous Advisory Circle has begun, weaving Indigenous perspectives throughout the curriculum would be an important long-term goal. This could include outreach to Indigenous theatre artists and companies as part of the student’s professional development, regular meetings with Indigenous artists and theatre makers within the pedagogical framework, and resources to help the students stay connected to their communities.

Moving forward, we have a great opportunity to recognize NTS’ responsibility to not only support the development of Indigenous artists and give them the tools to survive in a mainstream theatre environment, but also to be able to fulfill the Massey Report’s recommendations. A rich and vibrant theatre is possible, one that springs from collaboration, support and freedom of expression.

## INDIGENOUS-SPECIFIC PROGRAMMING AT NTS 2005-2009

*Reference is made below to the Ondinnok program. A separate document is available upon request to provide more context on the purpose and process of the program.*

### Positive outcomes:

- The industry opened up for Indigenous artists in Quebec.
- Students put into practice their ability to reinforce their own language, identity and spirituality in the training.
- Students were able to complete some of the training in Indigenous communities, making the program nomadic in nature and rooted in community.
- Relationships developed between arts organizations and Indigenous artists.
- Relationships with Indigenous communities were formed.
- The work and process affirmed each student's cultural identity.
- History and philosophy of Indigenous artistic practice was integrated into the curriculum.
- Outreach consisted of printed adds in Native Friendship centres, schools, cultural centres, etc.
- Information was disseminated at the Kahnawake PowWow, Wemontaci PowWow and the Assembly of Indigenous Youth in Maliotenam. As a result, the program received 30 applications.
- The programs' expectations and different stages were explained to all students.
- The students had the resources of their specific communities, as well as NTS' resources.
- The most Northern and remote reserves acknowledged the program and expressed an appreciation for its benefits.
- There were past students who joined Ondinnok's program, and students who have become professional theatre artists.

### Areas of concern:

- The goal of pairing students in the Indigenous-centric program with students in the non-Indigenous-centric program was not met.
- Participants stated that they had classes at the School, but the student body in the 'regular stream' did not acknowledge and were not aware of the students in the Ondinnok program.
- The coordinator was angry with the School, and it affected the students' experiences.
- The program did not give enough of an opening or as many opportunities to the Indigenous students.
- The students in the 'regular stream' did not take any classes taught by the Indigenous teachers in the Ondinnok program.
- There were no other Indigenous teachers at NTS, besides those running the Ondinnok program.