

# An Open Letter to Persephone Theatre

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From a collective of anti-racist theatre artists in Saskatoon

June 12th, 2020

To the Board of Directors of Persephone Theatre,

First of all, we would like to thank you for accepting the resignations of Del Surjik and Johnna Wright this week. This is an excellent first step, but it is not enough. Not only will the new Artistic Director need to be carefully considered, the entire institution that is Persephone Theatre must be examined.

We the undersigned are writing to you today to address the long-standing culture of racism and intimidation that exists at your institution.

Last week, Persephone Theatre posted a black square on Facebook that featured no caption. No other post gave context to why this black square was posted. We can infer that it was posted as part of the #BlackOutTuesday movement, which was meant to support the Black Lives Matter movement on the specific day of posting (June 2nd, 2020). BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) artists commented on the Facebook post asking questions of Persephone theatre, some of which were:

“Do you have an ongoing plan to address systemic racism that your organization partakes in?”

“Are you committed to uplifting local artists of colour?”

“How are you as a company going silent for blackout Tuesday when you have not really been vocal about anything?”

Instead of any response being given to these questions, the post was deleted and some BIPOC artists muted from leaving further comments. All subsequent “apologies” issued by Persephone Theatre for deleting this post have been further insulting to the BIPOC artists in the theatre community, including at least one absolution of their own guilt, by blatantly lying in saying the post was deleted “in error”. Persephone Theatre has a history of deleting Facebook posts and comments that we can look to as evidence that this is unlikely, in addition to the story that there was intent to post a different photo being unlikely when no other photo was posted.

In the days since this post, Artistic Director Del Surjik and Artistic Producer Johnna Wright have resigned, thanks to calls for accountability from BIPOC voices in the theatre community. While we acknowledge this as an important step, when the Star Phoenix published an article summarizing Del’s resignation, it made no mention of Johnna’s resignation and made ambiguous the reasons behind this decision. This is further erasure of the work that BIPOC artists put in over the last week and a half by meeting with Del, Johnna, and the Board of Persephone Theatre. We do not know if the press release that was sent to the Star Phoenix omitted this information or if that responsibility falls on the reporter, but it is nonetheless disheartening. Certainly, Del’s statement posted on Persephone Theatre’s website did not acknowledge the work and pain that BIPOC artists put into publicly and privately holding Persephone Theatre accountable over the past weeks -- and years.

This Blackout Square fiasco is not an isolated incident. It is merely the latest in a long history of discriminatory behaviour established by the leadership of Persephone Theatre. For years, Persephone Theatre has neglected to appropriately respond to incidents of racism and racially charged violence within its walls. The team behind the play *Kamploopa* have reached out to us about how inadequately their concerns were addressed, and in fact how their multiple requests for communication were ignored. Instead of acting to protect and support BIPOC, Persephone Theatre has established a process of silencing and dismissing acts of racism. The unacceptable behaviour Persephone showed on social media is not new but has finally brought their racist practices under public scrutiny.

These actions have led to the members of the collective writing this letter, made up of BIPOC and white allies who are active in the Saskatoon Theatre Community, taking matters into their own hands. Since Persephone Theatre has continually failed to appropriately address their institutionalised racism, BIPOC theatre artists have come up with the following list of ways Persephone Theatre can do better by them.

## Requests:

These requests appear in no particular order. All are essential to restoring faith in your institution.

- A formal public apology for the deletion of a Facebook post where BIPOC artists asked questions of the company's anti-racism policies, and an explanation of why this action was wrong. A genuine apology cannot include a lie, a rationale of how we got to this point, any vague language about what happened and who was harmed, or any excuses. See: [DARVO](#). [DARVO](#) is an acronym used to describe a common strategy of abusers.

The abuser will: **Deny** the abuse ever took place, then **Attack** the victim for attempting to hold the abuser accountable; then they will lie and claim that they, the abuser, are the real victim in the situation, thus **Reversing the Victim and Offender**. This usually involves victim blaming. Some therapists see DARVO as a specific form of gaslighting. (Source: Wikipedia) Your company has previously engaged in this practice and it has been deeply harmful.

- When programming co-productions, prioritizing working with Canadian theatres that are BIPOC focused, such as Obsidian Theatre, Rice and Beans Theatre, b current theatre, etc.
- To require all staff, administrators, and board members undertake formal Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression training by the start of next season, and to renew this training on a regular basis (Ideally, every few months as a form of professional development). We would like them to train with various organizations, and specifically with the department of Education Foundations through the University of Saskatchewan. This includes training, workshops, or consultations specifically on how to decolonize creative processes and hierarchies.
- To require all Persephone School of Theatre instructors to receive paid training in how to serve justice, equity, and decolonization in the classroom, which includes both class management and creation.
- To make clear commitments towards more BIPOC representation in Persephone School of Theatre student enrolment, achieved through meaningful outreach to schools, organizations, and communities with high BIPOC populations. This should include outreach to the various First Nations Communities within an hour driving distance from Saskatoon.

- The immediate creation and implementation of an Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppressive commitment, to be shared at every first rehearsal, with instructions on who to report instances of racism to, and a clear plan of action for when instances of racism occur. Look to CAEA's Not In Our Space requirements for guidance (<https://www.caea.com/Features/Not-In-Our-Space>). Please also look to ACTRA Toronto's statement on Racism and Discrimination. (<https://www.actratoronto.com/actra-toronto-statement-on-racism-and-discrimination/>)
  - For every show being produced by Persephone Theatre, there should be a mandatory Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression for all members of the production. One cannot do "too much" Anti-Racism work. If any production members disagree with such an approach, it should be examined whether or not their inclusion is harmful to marginalized cast members.
  
- The immediate writing and public publishing of a Code of Conduct. The Code of Conduct must include a plan of action for when the Code of Conduct is broken. Please look to the Canadian Creative Industries Code of Conduct.([readthecode.ca](http://readthecode.ca))
  - This code of conduct needs to be accessible on Persephone Theatre's website.
- An immediate review of Persephone Theatre's mission statement, and a publication of a new one.
- A commitment to hire a majority (more than 50%) of artists currently living in Saskatchewan.
  
- The immediate institution of a maximum hiring quota of 70% non-BIPOC (reflective of Saskatoon's demographics) that applies to all departments of Persephone Theatres operations, including but not limited to the board of directors, full and part time staff, creative teams, performers, writers, and theatre school instructors. This can and must be achieved through better outreach with BIPOC theatres and community organizations.

- A commitment to make one third of every season's Mainstage and Deep End shows written by a BIPOC theatre artist. This should include a dramaturgical and/or creation process with a member of the local BIPOC community whenever possible.
- A review of Persephone Theatre policy and Persephone Theatre Board policy that seeks to remove and replace racist policy, whether outright or implicit because it is based on pre-existing colonial policy that is oppressive to BIPOC, with inclusive policy that meets the needs of BIPOC artists- not just the white artists it was originally created for.
- A term limit applied to all leadership roles, for a maximum of seven years. This will prevent any potential problems with an individual becoming systemic in your institution. This has already proven to be a problem at your institution.

## Conclusion:

Adherence to the above requests is only the beginning of your journey to restoring faith with the community undersigned, and especially the BIPOC members of it. Adherence to 100% of the above requests will not be enough. Many of us will not return to your institution until there are drastic changes in leadership approaches and programming. This is your starting point that you are getting at the cost of the labour and re-traumatization of BIPOC. We trust that you will repay them with a timeline and plan of action detailing how you will implement the above requests. We are planning to continue communications with the board and staff of Persephone Theatre both publicly and privately until the situation is improved. Then we can begin the real work of making theatre that doesn't harm the people making or viewing it.

Our sincerest hope is that you will view this letter, and our private correspondences, and hear us. That you, as rational and caring people, will agree that one instance of racism is too many, take the above commitments to heart, and rise to the challenge of proving that racism is not welcome at Persephone Theatre. It will be hard, we know. But it will be worth it.

“...I still have faith in the future. And I still believe that these problems can be solved. And so I will not join anyone who will say that we still can't develop a coalition of conscience.”

Dr Martin Luther King Jr., from his speech *The Other America*, 1967

Sincerely,

Lauren Allen	Alyssa Billingsley	Emily Dueck
Yvonne Addai	Blythe Hanes	Anonymous
Logan Martin-Arcand	Terri Bauer	Lauren Holfeuer
Deanna Stockdale Winder	Anonymous	Chris Donlevy
Mckenna Ramsay	Anonymous	Caitlin Zacharias
Anna Mazurik	Cassandra Watson	James Miller
S.E. Grummett	Skye Brandon	Ed Mendez
Torien Cafferata	Daniel Williston	Emily Soussanna
Kate Herriot	Guifré Bantjes-Ràfols	Jessie Kraus
Robert Grier	Angela Kemp	Danielle Altrogge Richardson
Allyson	Emlyn VanBruinswaardt	Mitchell Larsen