

## Deanna Bowen, *God of Gods: A Canadian Play*, Art Museum at the University of Toronto, Toronto

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**University of Toronto Archives,  
Hart House Theatre Fonds**

← *God of Gods*, production still, Hart House Theatre, Toronto, 1922.

Photo : University of Toronto Archives

**Deanna Bowen**

† *Deconstructing the God of Gods: A Canadian Play*, production still with Archer Pechawis, Peter Morin, Lisa Myers, John G. Hampton & cheyanne turions, 2019.

Photo : courtesy of Art Museum, University of Toronto

## Deanna Bowen

### *God of Gods: A Canadian Play*

Deanna Bowen's *God of Gods* leads viewers on a daring path of research-creation that excavates Canada's fraught histories of nation-building, race, and representation. We begin with Bowen's chance discovery of artist and former University of Toronto faculty member Barker Fairley's signature on a 1911 petition protesting the arrival of Afro-Creek migrants in Edmonton fleeing persecution in Oklahoma (an exodus that intersects with Bowen's own family history). An influential early champion of the Group of Seven whose canvases still decorate the University of Toronto's storied halls, Fairley's troubled legacy leads Bowen down an archival rabbit hole tunnelling through the stratified histories of U of T's Hart House, which is currently marking its centenary year.

Bowen's project is a bold commission by curator Barbara Fischer, whose approach to centennial projects associated with the building that houses one half of the Art Museum for which she serves as Executive Director has been provocatively counter-monumental. In a moment characterized by resurgent nationalisms, it is reassuring that the University of Toronto has chosen enlightened self-scrutiny over naïve celebration to memorialize this loaded anniversary.

Financed by the Massey Foundation—a philanthropic arm of the eponymous family that produced both artists and politicians of international prominence—Hart House was home to Canada's first national theatre. It was there that one-time artistic director Carroll Aikins mounted his 1922 play *God of Gods*, from which Bowen's project takes its title. A grotesque projection of white fantasies of Indigeneity, Aikins's drama gave license to performances of redface that, as Bowen reminds us, dramatized the larger colonial project legitimized by Group of Seven members affiliated with Hart House and its network of powerful patrons. Bowen's installation interweaves these threads exposed by her historical detective work with a Hans Haacke-like precision.

The spellbinding centrepiece of Bowen's installation is a two-hour video shot in Hart House Theatre in lieu of restaging Aikins's play—which, as Bowen pointedly underlines, “cannot be reenacted.” In a roundtable format the artist is joined by Indigenous respondents Archer Pechawis, Peter Morin, John G. Hampton, and cheyanne turions, who collectively unpack the still-active legacies of Aikins's play, which, shockingly, was only recently reissued by the University of Ottawa Press. Though sparked by Bowen's historical research, the dialogue is propelled by a disconcerting awareness of “how little has changed,” and quickly shifts to a discussion of how deaccessioning art by the Group of Seven and other colonial artists could present an opportunity for institutions to redress historic wrongs today. Referring to the Group's ubiquitous landscape imagery, Morin declares that, “Those paintings make me want to die. ... They're not beautiful, *we're* beautiful. Those artists missed out.” Prior criticism of the Group of Seven has tended to focus on its members' strategic depopulation of the territories whose spectacular representation built their renown. Bowen's project presents an unfamiliar, but no less disquieting terrain, one populated by phantasmatic teepees and white actors “playing Indian,” to employ Philip Deloria's memorable phrase. New tools and strategies will be needed to approach this landscape in a spirit of critique: Bowen clears a path.

Adam Lauder

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