

## Diversity In Bloom In Montreal English Theatre

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Les visages de l'invisible

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... à Marie Leofeli  
Romero Barlizo

Playwright Mentor at Black Theatre Workshop



# Diversity In Bloom In Montreal English Theatre

**Marie Leofeli Romero Barlizo** is a Filipino-Chinese playwright, dramaturg and emerging screenwriter. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from UBC and graduated in Playwriting at NTS. She was one of the writers for *Urban Tales* at Centaur Theatre last December. Sophie Gee will be directing her play *Lucky* at Off-Fringe this summer in Montreal. She will be directing parts of Lynn Kozak's translation of the *Iliad* in the spring. She is also a Playwright Mentor at Black Theatre Workshop, the oldest Black theatre company whose mission is to encourage and promote the development of a **Black and Canadian Theatre**.



**Mentors in BTW's Artist Mentorship Program.**  
Back: Albert Kwan; Marie Barlizo; Tristan D. Lalla; Danielle Skene; Alexandria Haber.  
Front: Mike Payette; Eo Sharp; Lucinda Davis.

Photo: Valérie Bah

Each year, when the Montreal theatre season is announced, I can't help but notice how many diverse playwrights are being produced, or rather not being produced, in the city. Historically, it has been hard to ignore the fact that the diversity of Montreal is not reflected in the stories being told in our theaters. But diversity on the stage in the English Montreal theatre community is finally starting to flourish thanks to the collective push for equality from theatre artists such as Emma Tibaldo (Artistic Director of Playwrights' Workshop Montreal), Rahul Varma (co-founder of Tessri Duniya) and the co-founding members of Metachroma Theatre (Quincy Armorer, Glenda Braganza, Tamara Brown, Lucinda Davis, Julie Tamiko Manning, Mike Payette, Jamie Robinson, Warona Setshwaelo). It has been exciting to witness the shift and to be a part of the movement for change.

I am a Filipino-Chinese playwright who was born in the Philippines. In 2002, I also became the first Person of Colour (POC) to graduate from the National Theatre School's (NTS) Playwriting Program, twenty-two years after the program's creation in 1980. There are days when that title weighs heavily on my shoulders.

I grew up in a basement apartment in Côte-des-Neiges, dirt poor. My parents sacrificed their own dreams so that my sister and I could have a better life in Canada. The expectation to succeed and become a doctor as other members of my family was tremendous. I had to summon a great deal of courage since I knew that this decision would disappoint them, but for me it would have been harder to live a lie. The moment I told my family I wanted to pursue theatre, I knew I would be on my own. I worked three part-time jobs to pay for theatre school at Concordia

University; it was hard to focus on my art when I was hungry. It was only when I got a scholarship to go to the National Theatre School (NTS), that I started to believe that my dream was possible.

I deeply appreciate what NTS gave me; I don't think I would be a playwright and dramaturg today if it were not for the training I received there. It may be naive, but I never thought I was a token playwright at NTS. I was just a writer. Being the first POC to graduate from the program, however, I felt an incredible amount of pressure to succeed and I often felt inadequate. Especially because the POC admitted a year ahead of me, who was supposed to be the first to graduate, quit the program after their second year. At 27, I was the oldest student in my class and, with the exception of one acting student who was half-Japanese, the rest of my class was Caucasian. At the time, the most successful NTS POC alumni was actress Sandra Oh. The only POC mentor I had in three years at the school was Alyson-Sealy Smith, who directed my final project at the New Words' Festival.

Two playwrights are admitted to the Playwriting Program each year. In the highly competitive environment of NTS, I felt I was constantly compared to the other playwright in my year, a white male. It was clear that some classmates did not connect to my work, and that they did connect to his. It didn't help that in my first year, a few classmates let me know that they didn't think I would ever make it as a writer. I never dared say it aloud, but I often wondered if my peers couldn't identify with my work because I didn't look like them and my stories didn't reflect their reality. But not getting support from my class made me feel invisible. Every day that I didn't quit the program was a personal victory.

My worst fear was confirmed when a Montreal director, and friend, was hired to work on one of my projects, but declined. The director later confided that he/she opted to direct the work of the other playwright because he/she were told he was the better playwright. I didn't share this information with anybody because I felt humiliated. In the past when I had complained, I was labelled as challenging to work with.

After graduation, I was determined to get the experience I needed to develop my skills as a playwright and dramaturg. Despite some early opportunities from Playwrights' Workshop Montreal (PWM) and Tessri Dunya, I didn't feel there were enough chances to hone my craft. I decided to look elsewhere, and moved to Toronto where there seemed to be more production opportunities for diverse theatre artists, especially playwrights.

My husband and I came back to Montreal because we wanted to build our life here. While on maternity leave in 2012, I began to notice a significant shift. With the formation of Metachroma Theatre, Black Theatre Workshop's (BTW) appointment of Quincy Armorer as the new Artistic Director (AD), BTW's Artist in Mentorship Program (AMP) and Centaur Theatre's production of *Intimate Apparel*, theatre in Montreal was finally changing. English training institutions like NTS were being pro-active in terms of diversifying the student body and, surprisingly, many of these graduates were staying in the city. A number of independent theatre companies also developed programs to support emerging theatre artists, such as Artista at Imago and Young Creators' Unit at PWM. I finally felt that I didn't have to return to Toronto to work.

In 2015, through a Canada Council grant, I was able to be the Artist-in-Residence at BTW, allowing me to gain hands-on-experience and to launch my career as a dramaturg and playwright in Montreal. BTW is the oldest Black Theatre Company in Canada, promoting diversity and cross-cultural understanding in the arts by developing and producing stories from an Afro-Canadian perspective.

At the heart of BTW, is their AMP led by AMP Coordinator, Warona Setshwaelo. The program was conceived by Quincy and Mike Payette (former Assistant AD at BTW, now AD at Geordie Productions), who recognized the need for mentorship for emerging artists, especially artists of color, entering the profession. The AMP has made a tremendous impact on the Montreal theatre community by giving priority to Black artists and other diverse artists, offering needed support, and demonstrating that there is a place for them in our theatre community. I am thrilled, given the lack of opportunities, that the program has accepted a larger number of Asian theatre artists this year. I am also especially proud of the Playwriting Alumni, many of whom are taking centre stage this season.

The AMP bridges the gap between training and the professional world through the guidance of mentors, many of whom are also POCs able to relate to their mentees' experiences. I am honoured to have been a mentor for AMP for the past three seasons. The nurturing environment of the AMP fosters open discussions and reflections on diversity in the theatre and helps identify the challenges of what it means to work as an artist of color. After NTS, I had no idea how to deal with the challenge of being the "other". At that stage in my career, I would have greatly benefited from these discussions.

Seeing the different faces in the room, hearing about everyone's exciting projects and the opportunities they have generated, inspires and energizes me to continue writing my own plays, and in turn to create more opportunities and support for artists of color as they find their place in our community.

I refuse to be defined by my initial experience at NTS. Today, I still sometimes hear the argument that playwrights of colour are not the better playwrights. This argument is often used to justify the decision to not produce their work. Artists pride themselves in artistic excellence but from whose perspective and at what costs? How do we keep art alive and relevant when we play it safe, telling the same story and playing with the

same players? To me, art is about risk and inclusivity. As artists, we need to push boundaries so that audiences are exposed to different experiences, which they may never have had before, and so that they can be transformed. TDC

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