

Indigenous Theatre Protocols

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Indigenous Theatre Protocols

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Abstract

How can existing and reimagined protocols contribute to the decolonization of performing arts practices among Indigenous artists? How can they allow us to reconnect with our languages and the pre-Columbian concepts they keep alive? Who we are and who we will be have not been captured by how we have been represented. Like all the peoples of the earth, we have our own theatre traditions. How can we repatriate or draw inspiration from non-Western forms of theatricality rooted in our ancient cultures? Artistic protocols are the walking sticks that might guide us towards discoveries and rediscoveries deeply rooted in who we truly are. They promise to lead us towards vital theatrical practices in an era in which ecological collapse threatens the future of humanity.

Keywords: Ondinnok; theatre of reparation; healing; Indigenous dramaturgy; protocols



Un monde qui s'achève – Lola, with Sol Launière, Citlali and Catherine Joncas. Maison de la culture Frontenac, Montréal, 2015.

Photograph by Martine Doyon.

Since 1985, the year of our Indigenous theatre company Ondinnok's¹ founding, the Canadian constitution still does not recognize First Nations as founding peoples. The current political landscape appears to foreclose evolution for the foreseeable future, even as we play an increasingly fundamental role in defining Canada's national identity. It's not just in Canada, but throughout the Americas more broadly, that colonial national myths are being unsettled and deconstructed as we expose the genocidal intents and actions of the nation-states that were built by attempting to wipe out Indigenous civilizations.

This disruption of colonial national myths is at the core of the conceptual self-determination protocols of Indigenous artistic practices. These practices mobilize anti-colonial self-definition to repatriate our traditional art forms in our contemporary artistic practices. Since the founding of Canada in 1867, the state, the Church, and all colonial institutions have colluded to impede the transmission of our Indigenous knowledges by prohibiting ceremonies, dances, drums, songs, and ritual practices.² We, contemporary Indigenous artists, are seeking, in one way or another, to reconnect with our pre-Columbian roots. Each artist reaches a point at which the encounter with the legacy of their ancestors compels them to articulate a new understanding of their artistic practices and their social purpose.

Why and for whom do we create this art that is our own?

The suppression of languages, intergenerational trauma, the concentration camp-like system of reserves, and religious alienation have resulted in a cultural fragmentation that we must seek to resolve in order to achieve self-fulfillment.

After over thirty-eight years of Indigenous theatre, I have come to believe that journeying towards one's origins constitutes a path towards the future. To approach the concept of protocols as our pre-Columbian ancestors conceived them, we must first understand how they perceived time and territory.

We founded our company to create *Le porteur des peines du monde* (1985) for the first Festival du théâtre des Amériques³ (FTA). There and then, our ritual theatre was born – or reborn – in an empty lot (where the National Film Board building was recently constructed near the Place des Arts) in downtown Montréal. This abandoned site was transformed as the ground was covered with two healing circles made of corn kernels, black beans, yellow lentils, and red lentils, all connected by a large serpent made of reeds. A funerary platform created with birch poles rose towards the sky. Torches were lit. The drum, ancient songs. A being, half-human, half-bird, entered the space, carrying a heavy burden on his back.

At the time, people interested in the performing arts asked, “Is this theatre?” By proposing a performance form unfamiliar to Montréal audiences, one that was thought to have been long extinguished (particularly in Québec), *Le porteur des peines du monde* challenged assumptions about what theatre is. It was Indigenous theatre and it did not correspond to what was known as theatre in 1985. This was a rebirth of sorts. Without claiming full access to ancestral rituals and forms of expression, *Le porteur des peines du monde* sought to reflect them and to resonate with their forms and functions. As a theatrical ritual, it was based on one of the many mythological narratives of Yarakwa⁴ – the Sun, which, when it disappears in the west, descends underground to deposit its burden in the center of a healing circle, thereby purifying itself from the world's ailments that it carries on its back. Through this movement, the Sun is reborn as a luminous being and the following dawn, it takes up the burden of humanity and of all living beings once again and repeats this cycle. The Sun is the bearer of time. *Le porteur des peines du monde* was also a metaphor for the rebirth of Indigenous spiritualities and an affirmation that this land covered by the city is Indigenous land.

In 1985, performing a ritual ceremony before entering a space of representational play on the theatrical stage was seen as suspect. In fact, carrying out such a ceremony, which involved the burning of sage or resin, within a theatre was sometimes viewed as altogether impossible due to fire safety regulations. And this is still what happens most of the time today since the majority of theatrical spaces have strict fire safety standards. There are but a few theatrical spaces that currently allow us to fully adhere to the ceremonial protocols necessary for rituals that work to reappropriate and reinterpret our identity in the present moment.

UNESCO has declared the decade from 2022 to 2032 the “Decade of Indigenous Languages.” The fact is that all Indigenous languages in the world are facing accelerated erosion, and many are at risk of rapid extinction. In Kanata,⁵ many Indigenous people are seeking to reclaim their languages in response to the threat of a permanent loss of the archetypal, spiritual, conceptual, mythological, and even shamanic memory they carry. Language and territory are one, just as human beings and territories are interconnected by our archetypal and circular conception of time.

One of the functions of protocols, such as the ancient wampum protocol, for example, is to remind us that there is no discontinuity in time, that the past is never truly gone, that the past lives in the present because it is summoned by our rituals. We are beings of memory, and this memory forms our identity. For there to be a future, Yarakwa must return and carry the world once more. Hence the importance of mythology. We learn from it that we must sustain the world, nourish it, make our offerings, that we depend on balance, and that we are responsible for this balance. We are all, each and every one of us, suns that must carry the world, and we must learn to be reborn, to heal.

Our cultures are pre-Columbian cultures.

All the words in our languages are pre-Columbian. *Ondinnok* (or *undinot*, *haudeno*, *Hontino*)⁶ is an ancient Wendat concept shared by all pre-Christianized Iroquoians. There is no exact translation, but it has different meanings, such as revealing the secret desire of the soul (as what remains hidden can make one sick), or the loss of the spirit that protects our integrity, or even the divinatory sense of “seeing through” the body. It is also an ancient ceremony that uses masks (and thus the spirits and ancestors) for healing.

To dream or to make others dream for healing. We are already in the theatre.

We thought we had chosen a name for our company by selecting *Ondinnok*. Several years later, we realized that it's the word that chose us and gradually taught us an ethics, a responsibility, and an increased understanding of our art. We are talking about a creative journey spanning over thirty-eight years. This has been accomplished through trial and error, with humility.

We learn because we seek with passion.

In our search for a mythological Indigenous theatre, a theatre of resonance, protocols have always been present in one way or another. We work extensively with stones as anchors in the Indigenous traditions of the three Americas (North, Central, and South). The first stone that underpins our entire practice is respect. Without respect, nothing is possible. Respect for oneself, others, objects, and for everything that will manifest itself during our work, during our quest. Initially, we have four stones, four principles that guide our process: respect; not lying or deceiving oneself; not being afraid of fear; and not judging oneself or others. These four fundamental principles allow us not to lose ourselves when delving into the unknown. We must build absolute trust among ourselves and provide constant mutual support because our humanity depends on one another.

Like our ancestors, we consider the empty stage to be the reservoir of all possibilities. The empty stage is, for us, the mirror of the cosmos; it is the place where all manifestations, all the incarnations we summon, are revealed. We do not decide what or who will manifest; this is the divinatory power of theatre. To open the path for this type of quest, the respect for protocols is important. Protocols serve to decondition us so that our presence becomes open and available to travel through time to encounter beings other than ourselves and to be inhabited by unknown entities beyond all superstition.

This is what anthropologists call animistic thought.

In fact, we are the heirs of a worldview in which objects carry a living memory that engages in dialogue with us human beings. We are also the heirs of a vision that connects us to all living beings through an extended kinship system in which we belong to clans. More importantly, we have inherited a mythological memory that ties us to all Indigenous people, past and present, across the three Americas. The profusion of diverse expressions of Indigenous cultures from the far North to the far South is an immense treasure that colonization has sought to wipe out for several centuries.

What we have been still remains.

New protocols will be necessary for us to reclaim and anchor our practices in our languages and in non-Western forms.

The provision of rehearsal spaces and suitable stage areas that allow for total freedom of expression without any restrictions is necessary for the Indigenous performing arts to be experienced in their wholeness.

From the very beginning, we connected with our Elders, the keepers of tradition. Each time, after offering our Elders tobacco, there is a discussion about the intention of the theatrical act. There have never been judgments, only advice and encouragement. I believe it has become important

today to acknowledge senior Indigenous artists in their role as Elders for the advancement of art practices.

There are many types of theatricality. Each one has its approach and processes.

Not all of them require a protocol.

Theatre is an initiatory art. It can only be learned by experiencing its imaginary territory and the encounters that take place within it. One must learn to be inhabited. Theatre is initiatory because, to reach a state of play, one must open a path and establish a dialogue with the space and everything that will be manipulated. In this process, everything is important, everything deserves respect. The ideal place, for instance, must allow daylight and nighttime light to enter the space. The sun, the moon and the stars, the wind, are living beings, beings that inhabit our myths. It has often happened to us that the moving light during the day intervenes, dialogues with what is happening in the space, and suddenly makes us “see” the invisible, which would not have otherwise been perceptible. Another example: when we say that objects on stage are “alive,” this is because they have been “awakened” beforehand and have been nourished daily throughout our exploration.

We also work with technology. We create contemporary theatre that reflects the dramas and tragedies of the present. But we see that contemporary theatre today only stages human beings grappling with their relational and emotional struggles in an over-mediated reality controlled by algorithms.

Where has the dialogue with other living species gone?

I spoke of a theatre in connection with the cosmos, and this is not a New Age vision. A theatre of healing has been kept alive in some of our communities, both on the West Coast of Canada and right here in our longhouses. In these “dream houses,” men and women sing and beat drums for days and shake their rattles, theatre that is sung and danced taking place until men or women enter a trance. Then, the masks enter the sacred space. Giant birds, bears, and deer appear. Some masks representing ancestors come to sit among the participants. Nocturnal beings fall through the smoke hole and walk in the fire.

The universe is summoned to assist human beings in rediscovering or redefining their humanity. We need other species of living beings to “be human,” to be *onkweongwe*!⁷

What is the stage? The stage is a sacred space because it is the mirror of all possibilities. It represents the land, a place of untamed energies. For the stage to exist, one must open, create space, free up space. A circle. This is what our ancestors did. They would gather and open a circle that became their center. We had sacred places where we could confront what hurt us, communicate with our ancestors, our disappeared, or places for making amends, condolences, and alliances.

Our bodies carry all of our memories. When we are born, we inherit a genetic and memorial transmission. Some of our dreams express the world that came before us, and sometimes, through some of these dreams, we discover that we have already lived elsewhere, in another era, in another culture, perhaps. In some dreams, we are shown an object or someone, an animal, or we walk in an unfamiliar landscape, a forest. Doing *Ondinnok* is about gently learning how to have these waking dreams and how to capture what comes to us through these dreams.

When we step onto the stage, it is because something is calling us, and this call produces a sensation in the body that we learn to listen to. Stepping onto the stage is like walking into a dream. No one can cheat. If someone cheats and enters the space, we immediately know it, and nothing genuine occurs; everything becomes false. Or worse, we do not realize it, and sometime

later, maybe months, we are lost, we no longer understand what is happening to us. Deception disorients us. We thought we were going in one direction, and suddenly we are somewhere completely different, and we cannot orient ourselves.

We must then begin everything again.

Dreaming is one of the cornerstones of all Indigenous cultures. To dream properly, there are certain protocols to follow and an ethics to uphold. To dream properly is an art in itself.

Theatre should make us dream; it should harness the power of dreams.

One day, not so long ago, I was listening to a young woman who was telling the sad story of a community in which the abused children had all become silent. They no longer spoke and remained closed off to those who questioned them.

Even psychologists were unable to reach them.

Then someone had an idea. They dressed up as mascots, as animals. The children went for a walk with the animals and started to talk, to confide in the animals. There is a lesson here. How did our pre-Columbian Indigenous societies, left to their own devices, restore their balance when they experienced a collapse of values, a loss of trust in their humanity, a self-destructive collective wound? They summoned the animals because animals, unlike humans, do not lie. They have an ethics, an integrity that humans do not possess. For millennia, we have lived with animals.

Where are the animals? Why are they absent from our dramaturgies?

Why not summon them again, at a time when so many species are disappearing, and “our humanity” is in danger? What protocols should be established, what protocols should be rediscovered for them to agree to enter the “house where one dreams of oneself or dreams oneself into being”?⁸ How can we restore the dialogue between them and us while eschewing mere imitation, mere disguise? What would this theatre be like?

Undoubtedly, this process requires embarking on a vision quest, entering the land, being willing to learn through silence, even fasting. Waiting for this to happen, this encounter that teaches us what we no longer know.

A theatre of reparation.

We are in the process of decolonization and cultural reconstruction. We must learn from each other. Some of us have preserved practices that others among us have lost due to the harm caused by colonization. This portrait is that of all the First Peoples of the Americas. We are the survivors of genocide and cultural extinction. Colonialism, confinement to isolated reserves, religious prohibitions, and abuses have resulted in an alienation that we must transcend. This is one of the functions of the living art that is theatre.

Before reconciliation, there is a theatre of reparation to create for our own people. In this sense, I agree with the statement of Métis artist David Garneau (2012) regarding the concept of irreconcilable Indigenous spaces that reject the falsehood of reconciliation.

This irreconcilable space is the space that contemporary Indigenous theatre must occupy. At Ondinnok, we advocate for a reinvention of narrative forms and stage presence by increasingly connecting to our original languages and to the pre-Christian values and concepts that are ours. This changes the very function of theatre and offers a meeting point beyond the spectacular with those who are summoned. A different kind of encounter, a different kind of experience.

We also agree with the concept of the “relational shift” (Carter, 2019: 186), as defined by Jill Carter. We believe that Indigenous theatre is on the cusp of this necessary shift. It is no longer about telling our stories to audiences in a narrative form that is theirs, but about bringing to the stage everything that forms our true difference and immerses those summoned into the unknown. We don’t need to explain or to publicly justify ourselves. The path of reparation must be taken by those who need to repair. Reparation begins at the beginning: that moment when the treaty protocol was broken out of fear of “what we are,” of our bodies, through the denial of all our knowledge, through the racism and hatred that persist, lurking in the collective unconscious.

We must take time for ourselves. To rebuild ourselves. To become very strong, very flexible, very open, and to establish new alliances and renewed cyclical alliances with all our relations through our theatre to come.

This theatre is a place of uncompromising self-determination and a place of peaceful radical cultural transformation.

I come back to the wampum belts.

Three wampums are used for alliances as well as for condolences.

The first is for *wiping the tears from the eyes*. In ancient times, when representatives of another nation arrived with freshly painted faces, their hairstyles, and their songs, they were received at the edge of the forest at a distance from Kanata. The Elders would light a fire and exchange this first wampum belt, passing it above the fire. The wampum was an invitation to wipe the tears from their eyes because these people had traveled vast distances, faced many perils, and perhaps they had lost some of their own. It was important that their eyes be cleansed of their sorrows so they could see us clearly. The second wampum was for *cleaning the ears* so that words could be well heard and understood, and the third was for *clearing the throat* so that the spoken words could be pronounced clearly and be true words.

We are already in the theatre, here.

There are precise, choreographed gestures, an encounter with the unknown, and words that are spoken, carried. The staging is protocol-driven. What is going to happen is not yet defined. In the past, the response to the request or statement of strangers or ambassadors came after they had feasted, that is, after they had sung, eaten, and danced, and especially after those who received these words had dreamt. This means after the spirits, ancestors, and other cosmic entities had manifested themselves. This is the divinatory dimension of theatre. The response is not solely that of an author; it depends on what wants or needs to manifest.

There is a theatre in which everything is fabricated and conceptualized. Actors build their characters based on psychology, dramatic arcs, the director’s instructions, and a physical stylization of character. This is very good and results in excellent performances. Then there is a theatre in which the character is not constructed because their appearance on stage is the result of a “presence” traversing the actor’s body. The theatricality arises out of a performative process rather than from the representation of an idea. This compels us to learn from what happens rather than deciding what should be played and how to play it.

One needs to know how to begin.

The beginning of an approach, the initiation of a process, the first day, the first moments are immensely powerful, and at the same time, entirely fragile. This exploration requires us to fully inhabit “time,” to take all the time necessary so that the right spirit can join us, for the path to be favorable, and for all those gathered to be Eskinikonra!⁹ Of one spirit! Respect!

A beginning protocol is essential to collectively request permission to create a “temporal breach” that will allow us to manipulate time, to change eras, places, and bodies. This is a request to embark on a search for a heightened perception of reality so that we can all become available for the journey into the vastness that surrounds and flows through us. To obtain this permission, an offering or a “gift” must be made. It is the opening ceremony that allows us to “see,” to observe one another, to share everyone’s sincerity, and to connect with the invisible, with that which transcends us, with that cosmic mythology that contains all our stories. Through the sharing of this gift, we learn that we are a family.

With every theatrical adventure, we recreate a family.

This feeling must be anchored in the hearts of all participants without exception. This trust guides and unites us in the face of difficulties and obstacles to come. We depend on one another and on the truth of one another. The moment when we burn sage, resin, or another medicine, is fundamental because it is a practice that we have performed for millennia. When we do it, we are once again projected to the origin of our identity, of what we truly are.

We are dream seekers.

In 2010, we created a pre-Columbian piece in Montréal. *Rabinal Achi* is a Mayan theatrical drama that has been preserved and kept alive since the Spanish conquest of Guatemala in 1535 and continues to exist to this day in the village of Rabinal, in Baja Verapaz. This work is an archaeological relic: it escaped the missionaries and the numerous armed repressions that were carried out against Indigenous populations in this region of Central America. Just in the village of Rabinal, there were more than ten thousand deaths during the various massacres carried out by the Guatemalan army between 1980 and 1996. Every year, new mass graves are discovered of people who were tortured and killed.

Rabinal Achi is a piece that dates back to seven to eight hundred years before Christ. The text (there is a text) takes almost two hours to read by itself. This piece is a ritualized trial that concludes with the execution of the accused, in this case, a Maya K’iche war chief named Kawek. Without revisiting all the steps I describe elsewhere (Sioui Durand, 2021), Ondinnok’s project of adapting *Rabinal Achi* began in 2004 when I discovered in Paris the translation of the text by French anthropologist Alain Breton. However, my encounter with the Mayas of Guatemala dates back to 1978 and 1979. To develop this project, Catherine Joncas, myself, and other collaborators went to the village of Rabinal to see this theatre and meet its legitimate bearers, Father Jose León Coloch and José Manuel, his son. We found ourselves in the midst of Indigenous people, most of whom were peasants descending from the nearby mountains to perform this ritual theatre. To convince them of our intentions, to build an open and trusting relationship with them, we had to merge our mythologies, share our ceremonies, and make it clear to them that what we were going to do would not be the same as the theatre they perform.

In 2008, we invited them to Montréal, and then to our territory to introduce them to our Indigenous cultures. We wanted to see if we could really perform on stage with them. We returned to Guatemala in 2009 to strengthen our alliances and make essential purchases for the production. In 2010, despite several obstacles with the consulates and other challenges, they returned to perform with us on a professional stage and in front of a real audience (something they had never done before). The show, *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi*, presented at Ex-Centris in Montréal, was performed in their language, in Spanish, in French, in English, and even in Italian.

Without genuine transcultural sharing in which respect, listening, and friendship were at the core of the entire process, none of this would have been possible.

With their permission, we had the audacity to embody their pre-Columbian Mayan ancestors in front of them through the arrival of masks. This divinatory theatre was very delicate. Our Mayan friends perceived that we were doing it with full engagement, in accordance with the traditional legacy of what we call “raising the dead.” The masks we used were created from molds taken from bas-reliefs or photos of the sculpted faces of real Mayan individuals who had lived in the past. The on-stage meeting between our friends from Rabinal and the ancestors from whom they are descended was very moving and powerful.

What we did together by sharing *Rabinal Achi* in 2010 is very important because it represents an act of self-assertion that unearths the roots of Indigenous theatre. *Rabinal Achi* establishes the pre-Columbian existence of Indigenous theatre. Its production by Ondinnok demonstrates that it is possible to revitalize an ancient form, to reinterpret it on a contemporary stage. This production also shows that it is possible and necessary to transgress colonial cultural boundaries in order to re-establish relationships of artistic collaboration and cultural exchange across Indigenous nations in the Americas.

Since 1985, we have not always produced this type of theatre. Our artistic process has been the result of a long journey, a long quest. The theatre we need follows the needs of the moment. We evolve within the flow of events that influence society and the world as a whole. The theatre we need is never detached from its era. Ours has become critical, denunciatory, political, historical, caricatural, often tragic, and mythological.

Our theatre is an art involving multiple practices whose roots go back to the need “to see oneself,” “to hear oneself told,” the need to split oneself open, to encounter the other and the different. Among some peoples like the Zunis, Hopis, and Mayas, theatre can become a trial. Sacred clowns can dispense justice. This is also a function of Indigenous theatre.

A small warning.

Ancient and modern protocols should not stifle creativity and artistic exploration. Decolonization involves the rediscovery and preservation of our knowledge and traditions. Our knowledge and traditions must remain accessible; they must be shared.

A distinction must be made between cultural appropriation and borrowing. Many young Indigenous artists learn by borrowing from other Indigenous cultures worldwide. When there is borrowing, there is also a duty to honour, not to claim as one’s own. In the current state of our communities, anything that allows our youth to develop their imagination and knowledge is vital. Many of us have learned through the discovery of practices and values from elsewhere. We inherit a world that is a shattered mirror, fragmented into thousands of shards. Each of us possesses a shard. Gathering these shards, which promises to reconstruct the mirror, will enable us to reflect the universe anew and rebuild our true identity.

We are at home everywhere in the three Americas.

We have lost much of our ancient knowledge, and what we don’t have, others have preserved. Our ancestors exchanged songs, dances, myths, practices, ways of doing things. Women and even children circulated and were part of these exchanges.

Exchange, gift, and alliance are woven together.

All Indigenous peoples from nations other than my own have brought much to me, and I remain curious about the ritual and theatrical practices of all Indigenous peoples around the world.

We share the same cyclical time through the same Spirit, in respect!

Niawenkowa!

Biographic Note

Yves Sioui Durand (Huron-Wendat) is an actor, playwright, director, and filmmaker. He is one of the founders of Ondinnok Productions and served as its artistic director up until July 2017. Since then, he has primarily dedicated himself to his role as an artistic mentor. He has authored numerous plays and artistic reflections. In 2017, he was awarded the Governor General's Performing Arts Award, the highest recognition in the performing arts in Canada. In 2018, he was named a Companion of Québec's Order of the Arts and Letters.

Notes

- [1] Ondinnok Productions, an Indigenous theatre company based in Montréal, Québec, Canada, was founded in 1985 by Yves Sioui Durand, Catherine Joncas, and the late John Blondin.
- [2] The Indian Act criminalized the potlatch in 1884, and gradually, it criminalized all cultural ceremonies, festivals, and performances. Dancing was prohibited outside of reserves in 1914 and within reserves until 1951.
- [3] The FTA is a major theatre festival founded in 1985. Its mandate was to showcase the theatrical traditions that spanned the Americas. Subsequently, the FTA became the Festival TransAmériques and became increasingly diversified by including international productions.
- [4] "Yarakwa" is an archaic term in the Wendat and Haudenosaunee languages that designates the sun.
- [5] "Kanata" is an archaic term in the Wendat and Haudenosaunee languages that means "a settlement of dwellings." It was interpreted by French colonizers as the name of the country. Subsequently, its regions became known as Lower Canada and Upper Canada. The foundation of Canada took place in 1867.
- [6] "Ondinnok," "undinot," "haudeno," or "Hontino": archaic Wendat and Haudenosaunee word. Here, we see different ways of writing the same word according to different oral versions and Iroquoian dialects.
- [7] "Onkweongwe" is an archaic term in the Wendat and Haudenosaunee languages used to refer to human beings.
- [8] "In the house where one dreams of oneself or dreams oneself into being": for me, this old metaphor designates the theatre as a place.
- [9] "Eskanikonra!" is a word in Kahnienkéha'ga. Loose translation: "One mind! Of one spirit! Respect!"

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