

Oppose performance of plays to segregated audiences at the Canadian government-funded National Arts Centre!

Omar Ali
21 February 2023

All workers, including those in the performing arts and other cultural sectors, must unequivocally condemn and oppose the decision of the Canadian government-funded National Arts Centre (NAC) to stage two plays during its current season in front of segregated audiences on so-called “Black Out nights.” The racist conceptions that motivate such initiatives are deeply politically reactionary and artistically debilitating.

From February 9 until February 18, the play *Is God Is* by American playwright and spoken word artist Aleshea Harris was performed at the NAC’s Babs Asper Theatre in Ottawa. To mark Black History Month, the performance on Friday, February 17, was held as the NAC’s first “Black Out night.” Another “Black Out Night” performance, this time of Cheryl Foggo’s play *Heaven*, is scheduled for May 5.

The initial NAC news release called for “an all-black identifying audience” and the vendor Ticketmaster listed the event as “exclusively” for black people. The NAC brazenly declared on its website that the performance “will welcome Black audiences to experience and enjoy a performance in the Babs Asper Theatre.” Noting the supposed “power” of these events, the NAC claimed that a “Black Out is an open invitation to Black Audiences to come and experience performances with their community. The evenings will provide a dedicated space for Black theatregoers to witness a show that reflects the vivid kaleidoscope that is the Black experience ... and open the doors for Black-identifying audiences to experience the energy of the NAC with a shared sense of belonging and passion.”

The NAC’s status as a federally funded venue, in the heart of the nation’s capital no less, led to a public backlash against this racist-conceived and promoted event. In response, the NAC felt compelled to add the less than convincing sentence “Everyone is welcome at all our shows” to the page featuring the above-quoted text.

The concept of “Black Out” performances is credited to the playwright Jeremy O. Harris, who instituted one for a Broadway production of his play *Slave Play* in 2019. Other venues have held similar events since. Despite the protestations of the NAC, other sources indicate clearly the exclusionary nature of such events. The website Blackoutnite.com says “A BLACK OUT is the purposeful creation of an environment in which an all-Black-identifying audience can experience and discuss an event in the

performing arts, film, athletic, and cultural spaces—free from the white gaze.

In the website’s FAQ section, its creators advise how potential legal challenges can be skirted, including by making such events by-invitation only, then adds, “While the intention of BLACK OUT was clearly to create a space for as many Black-identifying audience members as possible, nobody was turned away.”

Harris himself is prominently cited on the page, explaining that “Black out felt like being transported to some new place in the future, where this was a standard, not a possibility.” It does not appear to have occurred to Harris that far from being forward-looking, his fantasy world is firmly rooted in the past, when ruling-class imposed racial segregation produced the environment into which he desires so much to be “transported.”

Harris makes clear that the aim of such events is not to promote theatre or further the interests of performing artists, many of whom have seen their living standards decimated by decades of real-term wage cuts, austerity and the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on live shows. Rather, the goal is to pave the path towards enrichment for a striving layer of careerists. What he terms “outreach,” he hopes “will snowball into more representations of Black bodies, both onstage and off”—that is, their continued integration into the ruling class and its official cultural life in greater numbers.

Even the NAC’s half-hearted attempt to save face with the claim that “everyone” was welcome February 17 proved too much for some of the racist zealots. The former president of the Ontario Black History Society, Rosemary Sadlier, told Global News, “When people gather together on an ad hoc or at one purposeful moment, like going to the theatre, that is not segregation.” In defence of the “Black Out,” an executive director at the NAC meekly tried to compare it to programs geared to youth or women.

A decision by any theatre to stage a production on such an explicitly racist basis would be a scandal, but the NAC’s position as Canada’s premier government-funded arts institution makes it all the more so. This fact was underscored one day prior to the opening of *Is God Is*, when fully one-third of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s cabinet, including Trudeau himself, gathered at the NAC for the government’s official marking of Black History Month.

The prime minister’s wife, Sophie Grégoire Trudeau, served as

the NAC's honorary chair at its annual gala last November. The hosting of Black Out performances by the NAC points to the ruling class' increasing reliance on racialism to foment divisions among workers, so as to head off a unified movement in defence of their social and democratic rights.

The Trudeau Liberal government is a fervent purveyor of the most reactionary forms of identity politics based on race, gender and sexual orientation. It has promoted a conception of Canada as a "multicultural" society divided into arbitrarily defined and discrete "communities"—the "Black community," "Indigenous community," and "2SLGBTQI+ community" etc.—requiring separate political representation. The Liberal government is pursuing what it boasts is a "feminist foreign policy" by dispatching over \$2 billion in weaponry to the far-right regime in Ukraine to conduct NATO's war on Russia and supporting Washington's no less incendiary military-strategic offensive against China. The privileged sections of the middle class from whom the spokespeople for these "communities" are drawn serve as a key base of support for Canadian imperialist policies abroad and attacks on social spending and workers' rights at home.

The use of an NAC stage for a "Black Out" performance is notable not just because of its close association with the government, but also because of its semi-official role as a cultural arbiter. As the NAC states on its website, it is "Canada's bilingual, multi-disciplinary home for the performing arts ... and nurtures the next generation of audiences and artists from across Canada."

If the NAC and much of Canada's ruling elites realize their aim of "nurturing" young audiences and performers on the putrid gruel of race-based identity politics, it will have a thoroughly retrograde and poisonous impact on all aspects of political and cultural life. The absurdity of using "black" and "white" and other racial terms to define music, theatre, art or literature is self-evident to anyone who takes the time to examine the historical development of human culture itself. Its greatest representatives have been nourished from and inspired by the widest variety of social, economic and political sources that cut across the artificial racial categories—social constructs devoid of any objective scientific basis—thrown up by the purveyors of identity politics and their sponsors in corporate boardrooms and government ministries.

Those who would argue otherwise find themselves in very bad company historically, from those anti-enlightenment currents who denied the possibility of accessing universal human experiences and truths to the biological racism of the Nazis in questions of art and culture. How precisely will the saturation with racial exclusivism assist young playwrights, musicians, writers and audience members to make sense of and address artistically the most pressing questions of our time for audiences of all ethnicities and nationalities?

Right-wing tabloids around the world such as Britain's *Daily Mail* and Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post*, which spend much of their time railing against immigrants and appealing explicitly to the far-right, cynically picked up on the anger towards the NAC's "Black Out" night and cast themselves as colour-blind opponents of racialism. In the pages of the *Toronto Sun*, which championed the fascistic Freedom Convoy, Tory-aligned crank Brian Lilley

invoked the mantle of Martin Luther King in opposing the event.

While bemoaning the demise of inclusive art, the conservative media have been comparatively silent when on February 8, a drag story-time event also held at the NAC was the target of a far-right demonstration. The fascist agitators were severely outnumbered by event supporters.

It is unclear what role, if any, the author of *Is God Is* played in the NAC's "Black Out" night performance. The play itself has received a number of accolades, including an OBIE Award for playwriting and the Helen Merrill Playwriting Award. Aleshea Harris also received the Relentless Award from the American Playwriting Foundation. The award was made in honour of the late Phillip Seymour Hoffman and comes with a US\$45,000 prize, the largest in the industry.

According to a synopsis, the play follows the story of twins Anaia and Racine, as they travel to California with instructions from their mother to kill their abusive father. In praising the play, the *Globe and Mail* wrote, "Despite its shifts in style, *Is God Is* has the predictable and satisfying overall structure of an action movie or video game, with the sisters building up toward fighting the big boss." It appears that it is not for nothing that Harris has been compared to Quentin Tarantino and Jordan Peele.

In an interview with the *New Yorker*, Harris said, "I think what I'm interested in is disrupting these really narrow ideas that people unfortunately still have about Blackness onstage. A lot of folx (sic) don't think Black people can exist onstage unless the work is one of realism."

Instead of realism, Harris offers a "play-pageant-ritual" in another work of hers entitled *What to Send Up When It Goes Down*. The *New Yorker* profile describes this work as "an event at which grief was a bridge to the past—to the Black men and women killed—and to the potential future: more deaths." The audience was given black ribbons and asked to step forward in response to questions about whether they had suffered or witnessed various acts of racism.

Much of this contains the unwelcome stench of upper-middle-class Afro-pessimism, where violence and bigotry are mystified—rather than understood within the context of capitalism and its ruthless class exploitation—and portrayed as all-pervasive and intractable. These real problems are highlighted only to induce self-flagellation on the part of members of the liberal upper-middle class, black and white alike, and to promote black nationalism and its agenda of securing greater, race-based access to power and privilege in government, the professions and business.

"*Is God Is* is me going scorched earth on respectability politics," Harris told the Royal Court Theatre. "They cannot save us. They will not save us."

What will? Harris does not—and likely cannot—say.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact