

Students confront history through Magnus production

BY DANIELLE CHANDLER

THINK about all that you learned in school. If you grew up in Canada and attended a publicly funded school, staple subjects likely included English, French, math, sciences, geography, and history. The history of the world. The history of our nation. The French Revolution, the fur trade, the wars fought on beaches and in cities overseas, the voyages of men like John Cabot, Jacques Cartier and Samuel de Champlain who “named” and “settled” this great land.

Think about all that you didn’t learn in school. Specifically, the unspeakable practices in Canada’s past that are now making headlines around the world.

“I didn’t know that” are words uttered by a character in Magnus Theatre’s student-led production of *Stolen, Azhen*. They’re words that are representative of generations of non-Indigenous Canadians’ knowledge about the residential school system. They’re words that can no longer hold true but whose implications are part of a national reckoning that has only just begun.

Themed as ‘The Reconciliation Project’ at the start, Magnus Collective Creation students began working on the script in October 2019 — 19 months before the discovery of 215 unmarked graves at a former residential school site in Kamloops shocked the world. The topic had been suggested by a long-time Magnus Theatre student, in an effort to tell a story relevant not only to his First Nations heritage, but to the entire City of Thunder Bay — a region that has one of the highest concentrations of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

The Collective Creation Project is an annual initiative that sees local high school students



ONE CITY,
MANY VOICES

The Thunder Bay’s Anti-Racism and Respect Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

come together to create a play about a relevant social issue. And nothing seemed more relevant than a story about the meaning of reconciliation in a city that has been plagued by very public incidents of racism and violence toward Indigenous people.

Informed by their own experiences, those of their friends and family members, and many weeks of research, the students wrote and workshopped a script that examines the Canadian residential school system and its intergenerational impacts on survivors and their families.

In the first act, the process of colonization is depicted as an assembly line, where priests cut the children’s braids, don them with “civilized clothing,” turn them out with Christian names and apply force until the children become too afraid to use their traditional languages and internalize the shame. The long-lasting effects of these traumatic experiences are told like a children’s fairy tale — the little girl left the bad place and tried to go home, but when she got there, everything had changed — a simple depiction of an incomprehensibly complex situation.

But *Stolen, Azhen* doesn’t sugar-coat things. The story men-

tions substance abuse, suicide and the ongoing violence against Indigenous women and girls. It confronts racist stereotypes head on.

For the students, creating and sharing this story is itself an act of reconciliation. It is a call to action, an invitation to start healing together by choosing your own acts of reconciliation, however small they may seem. Consider the words you use, speak up against racism, learn a greeting in an Indigenous language, know whose land you visit when you travel.

The students recognize that we still have a long way to go, but they say the most rewarding part of the project was seeing their collective knowledge grow over time, to get to participate in shaping a society that listens, acknowledges, and acts to do better. And it starts with understanding now what will hopefully soon be a vital part of the nationwide curriculum, however uncomfortable that lesson may be.

While the students’ hopes of performing live were hindered by the pandemic restrictions, their work did culminate in a digitally staged reading now available on Magnus Theatre’s YouTube channel. The project is presented in partnership with the Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre with support from the Thunder Bay Community Foundation and the Ontario Arts Council.

Danielle Chandler is theatre in education director at Magnus Theatre. She is an arts educator and qualified teacher, with experience teaching both nationally and internationally in Toronto; Tenterden, England; Melbourne, Australia and Siem Reap, Cambodia. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.