



GEORDIE THEATRE

MENTAL HEALTH WORKSHOPS FOR 10 BLACK YOUTH

In collaboration with DESTA Black Youth Network

OVERVIEW

1. The Collaborators

Project Lead: **Geordie Theatre**



Geordie Theatre is Quebec's leading English-language Theatre for Young Audiences company that entertains, provokes thought, sparks the imagination, and challenges our audiences. We celebrate theatre's powerful impact by working with exceptional emerging and established professional artists from various disciplines and cultural backgrounds to create plays that are relevant and enchanting; inspiring dialogue between communities, children and parents, as well as teachers and students of all ages. We are committed to developing beautiful and important works featuring the wealth of diverse voices in Quebec, Canada and abroad while continuing to build relationships with our audience and extend our reach through inclusive outreach initiatives as well as through local and national touring.

With Mike Payette at the helm as the only Black Artistic Director of a non-culturally mandate company in Quebec, Geordie is particularly sensitive and responsive to ensuring that underrepresented communities have access to the work that we do and more so, are given agency to have themselves and their realities reflected on stage.

Project Partner: **DESTA Black Youth Network**



DESTA was founded in 2006 with a mandate to focus on the employability needs of Black youth in Little Burgundy. An integrated strategy was adopted to address both systemic and personal barriers to employment, such as justice involvement, housing, and lack of resources. Recognizing the economic needs of participants, DESTA's mission was redefined in 2017 to center on education, employability, and entrepreneurship. On-site structured programming was developed to give participants access to diverse training opportunities and to help them build greater financial security.

Facilitator: **Lisa Ndejuru**



Dr. Lisa Ndejuru co-leads the Concordia president's task-force subcommittee on student services. She holds a transdisciplinary PhD from Concordia University and a permit for psychotherapy from the Ordre des psychologues du Québec. Born in Rwanda, she has served the Rwandan diaspora in North America for more than 20 years as an organizer, researcher and

activist. Her extensive experimentation with storytelling, play and improvised theatre aims for individual and collective meaning-making and empowerment in the aftermath of large-scale political violence. She was one of the 2017 Concordia public scholars and the first John F. Lemieux fellow for genocide studies in 2018. Currently a 2020 Provost's Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Toronto's faculty of information, Lisa aims to activate an archive of pre-colonial *Ibitekerezo* wisdom tales.

2. Project Background and Description

Context



The killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the beginning of 2020 sparked protests and a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement which shook the world (again), and the seismic waves were uniquely felt in Black communities within the United States and Canada. The COVID-19 pandemic and contemporary anti-Black racism incidents have shone further light on the systemic racism and hardships faced by Black people in Canada, and the constant reminders of being othered or dehumanized have been too much to bear for so many Black people. Our Black youth in particular are desperately seeking light and hope through the many overlapping crises, which have had and continue to have devastating impacts on mental health.

While the discourse surrounding systemic racism and marginalization of Black people in Quebec and Canada has been a reality for decades, it only reached a mainstream platform following these recent events.

As the arts sector brought forward their statements of solidarity to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) communities, they were also met with criticism with regards to the historical injustices that are ingrained within the institutions. For many years Geordie has been a champion for voices that are oppressed, and as Artistic Director, Mr. Payette feels the urgency to embolden Geordie Theatre's potential for meaningful community engagement and to build bridges between the theatre we provoke and our current social climate.

In August 2020, Mr. Payette reached out to DESTA Black Youth Network to propose a collaboration on a series of workshops for DESTA's stakeholders. These workshops will relate to Geordie's upcoming production of *Virginia Wolf* and address mental health as it intersects personal safety, freedom and artistic expression considering of the contemporary social climate.

In conjunction with this performance, Geordie and DESTA offer the opportunity for 10 Black youth (aged 18 to 25) to engage in a four-part, socio-theatrical workshop that aims to use the arts as a platform to inspire social dialogue, unpack trauma, and motivate communal dialogue. The workshop explores performing art as it relates to articulated lived experiences and paths to reclaiming the power and strength that have been lost.

Guided and conceptualized by psychotherapist and theatre therapist Lisa Ndejuru, the workshop will be a safe space – through practical activities and discourse – that aims to re-ignite self-awareness and give light during these times, which weigh heavy on many in the Black community. This four-part workshop aims to take the topic of mental health out of the taboo category for Black communities and centre it, in order to come together and, by doing so, create an environment that supports and encourages hope, growth and strengthened mental health.

About: *Virginia Wolf*



Geordie Theatre's production *Virginia Wolf*, based on the eponymous, Governor General award-winning children's story by Kyo Maclear, will be presented in May 2021. Playful in nature and rife with creativity and wonder, this heartwarming play addresses anxiety and mental health through a young person's (and their caregiver's) perspective. The play is inspired by the real-life relationship between Virginia Woolf and her sister, Vanessa, who cared for her as she lived with mental illness. *Virginia Wolf* follows two young sisters, Virginia and Vanessa: Virginia is feeling low, dark, and does not want to interact or communicate with anyone, while her older sister, Vanessa, journeys through the piece on an investigation to understand – not change – Virginia. With the help of her compassionate and resourceful sister, Virginia learns to navigate her unwanted emotions and develops mechanisms that enable her to cope, such as creating her own *Bloomsbury*, a mental and physical space where her feelings are valid and supported. This is a story that promotes allyship and understanding of those who are having a tough time, and where the conversation of mental health among youth serves as a foundational theme.

The play will be directed by Mike Payette. In this production, the character of Vanessa is played by a Black performer, which supports a larger social conversation focused on the intersections of Blackness and mental health.

About: *The Workshops*



The workshops will be delivered remotely via Zoom. The program is designed as a catalyst for peer-to-peer dialogue, with additional input of qualified facilitators. While the workshop cannot replace individual psychotherapeutic support, individual trauma may be addressed if participants volunteer to share their experience.

The four individual 3-hour sessions will be broken down as follows:

1st Session: Introduction, Orientation, stocktaking

Participants will be introduced to the program and the themes of Virginia Wolf. Through participatory stocktaking and using the concept of "Performative Inquiry", they will be asked to document: where they see themselves; what obstacles and opportunities present themselves to their artistic expression; what brings calm; what brings power?

2nd Session: Relation to Theatre

Participants explore means of expression: How do I get heard? Do I ask to be heard/seen? What is a mental place of potential? What is a mental place of calm? What physical manifestation do mental places require? Exploration of a personal "Bloomsbury" as a mental place of comfort inspired by the play, through guided visualization.

3rd Session: Virginia Wolf

Participants attend a performance of Geordie Theatre's Virginia Wolf (details below) and reflect in conversation. Questions: Which moment of the production resonated with you? What language do we need to talk about mental health? What is a vision of beauty from the play that inspired possibility and light? How was Virginia guided through moments of feeling "dark" or "weighted"?

4th Session: Reflection and conclusion

Which path did the program set me on? What are ways towards hope, peace and safety? What helps build, and what erodes a personal Bloomsbury? Which artifact represents the journey?

It is important to re-iterate that the space is created to allow the participants to feel safe and encouraged to investigate themselves through the container of artistic process. To that end, Lisa Ndejuru will be leading these workshops, with the support of two support-facilitators to offer opportunity for participants to step out if necessary and be followed through in a meaningful way. This allows the participants to feel individually supported while also being in a group setting.

3. Future



In recognition of the importance of this initiative and partnership, DESTA and Geordie's relationship is built on a foundation of mutual growth and learning. Geordie's programming addresses key issues on a continual basis and we are proud to start this year and build on this initiative, for the benefit of future participants.

