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[00:00:00] The arts have always been a passion with me. I'm a, I'm a poet, I'm a performer. Um, and in the eighties I was very involved with both Black Theatre Canada and I started the Black Perspectives Cultural Program in the Regent Park community. And I'd work with a lot of, um, you know, now very successful, thankfully, uh, Black artists like Dionne Brand and Lillian Allen and Clifton Joseph and Marlene NourbaSe Philip and that kind of stuff. Um, so through the nineties I had, um, working in government, uh, I was heading up anti-racism work. And we became very aware of the, uh, issues around, um, let's say the Writing Thru Race Conference, uh, performances, like, um, when Drabinsky wanted to bring Showboat to Toronto. Um, and also when, uh, the Princess of Wales Theatre had Miss Saigon. [00:01:00] Um, so we did a lot of work with artists in the community to have forums through government to talk about what was inappropriate about these things. And so when I got out of government, uh, I really wanted to kind of see where artists were at, as much had happened in the nineties. Uh, you know, the whole thing of the Royal Ontario Museum, for example, um, the Writing Thru Race Conference, which did happen, um, and you know, various protests, um, and so on. So I was interested in, you know, where were things in 2002. Um, so I began talking to artists predominantly, um, that I had known for years, saying "Hey, what's up?" Uh, whereas the challenge was many artists that decided they didn't want to, um, you know, they want to do things on their own. And Canada Council started its Stand Firm program at that time so there was some funding flowing in. Uh, but many of the artists began to recognize is they wanted to create art. They didn't want to have to be involved in, you know, uh, finding the venue, [00:02:00] making sure the venue was a good performance space for artists. Um, so for dance, for example, that and then having an appropriate floor. Uh, for theater, issues around dance as well, lighting, et cetera, et cetera, stage management. And then of course there was the promotion, the communications, the marketing. Um, and these were artists who were creative individuals and so that was outside of their, um, you know, interests. Um, and at the same time I began to have a conversation with a number of service organizations that were, uh, working with, uh, venues, um, and also artist organizations like Cahoots, for example, that I met with, um, what is now Ontario Presents. It was then called Community Cultural Impresarios. And what I learned from the presenters were they knew things were changing, uh, but they didn't know how to make the connections. They didn't know the depth, the time the whatever, how they could make changes, how they would, understand the [00:03:00] quality of this art that was springing up around them in every which way whatsoever.

And I guess we went back and forth in conversations with them, the Sony Centre, SAVAC, uh, Cahoots, um, Community Cultural Impresarios. Rose Jacobson was then setting some work up with the D/deaf and Disabled community. Um, also, sorry, Creative Trust, um, which was supporting midsize theaters, um, to gain some revenue and to restructure themselves to be more lucrative.

Um, and then about 2009, 2008, um, Warren Garrett of Community Cultural Impresarios really felt his organization had to kind of take the dive. Uh, they had to stop talking about it and just do it. So we formed a relationship through Community Cultural Impresarios as a

project. Um, and we didn't have a name. We simply said we wanted to promote pluralism in [00:04:00] the arts. Um, so it came into the Ontario Trillium foundation. Uh, where there was a great grant officer, Sanjay Shahani, um, he was an amazing character. Had really good view. He had worked at both the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council so he had a good idea of what was going on and the need for this kind of initiative. So he gave us funding, uh, or Trillium gave us funding for two years to work with, um, Community Cultural Impresarios and their presenters, um, to look at it. So we did town halls. We brought artists together with presenters and, um, at the same time, we were also investigating how to create a toolkit that presenters could use, uh, any or any, any venue could use to promote pluralism and to engage in work around that area.

Um, and that took a couple of years. Um, I think we released it in 2012. So it was about three years after this started, but we had gone through seminars, town halls, [00:05:00] and at all town halls we made sure to have artistic showcases. And we were going to present artists who we thought were, you know, cutting edge. Um, who can also talk about their artistic practice and the standards of excellence that are within them. Um, so we continue to do that till today. Um, but that's what inspired me to start CPAMO and, um, and to build it. Um, and then after a couple of years, uh, we moved away from, um, uh, now called Ontario Presents to set up our own organization. That was in about 2015.

Equity, diversity inclusion. A), uh, we would never use diversity as far as people are concerned. We would talk about diverse art forms. Um, but we would focus more on equity. If you have equity, you will have diversity. If you have diversity, it doesn't mean you're going to have equity. It's the rare organization that really is going to say, "Yeah, we got to step into this. And this is going to take a lot of [00:06:00] time." The other area we looked at, because of the mass incredible demographic change we're seeing in this country since the 1970s in particular, is community engagement. And community engagement isn't just getting out, it's not outreach. It's not, it's not audience development. It's actually being part of the community. So it encourages arts organizations to get out their door. Um, be part of, you know, go to COBA's meetings, be there, right? Or Dance Immersion or SAVAC or Little Pear Garden Be there. Listen to them. Hear what they're doing. Find out ways that you can make a connection. It's not about dragging people back to your organization. It's about being within the community. And that means spending time, uh, you know, because first thing, um, is that some people would get suspect and rightfully so. I remember once being at a town hall that we were doing and [00:07:00] a woman comes in, a white woman, I'm not going to name the organization. And she comes in and says, I'm looking for this Indigenous person, that Indigenous person, this Black person, that South Asian person. I said, wow, it sounds like you're a head hunter. That's the wrong way to go. That is the wrong way to go. And no, I'm not going to tell you who they are. But I did offer to speak to the person, saying, you know, look, I understand your interest, but wow, you're coming in like a bull in a china shop, so to speak. Those are some of the, um, uh, concerns around saying to organizations, you need to spend time. You have to build a relationship. Do not expect overnight success. Right? The third area is around the programming. Not just what's on stage. Who is selecting what's on stage and who's doing the education about what's on stage. So how to involve IBPOC artists or art service [00:08:00] or arts administrators in those decision-making processes to understand, okay, what are they seeing as important? And why are they seeing it as

important? Then there's the internal stuff, the human resource side of things, you know, how do you hire people? How do you onboard people? Do you have policies on harassment, discrimination, that kind of stuff. You know, who's on your hiring committees, but it's also making sure that the organization has its policies and procedures in place around harassment, discrimination and learning about microaggressions, uh, which has become, and this is becoming a bigger issue these days. And then the final area we look at is, you know, the whole notion of audience development. Uh, really we, we put that on a back burner because we feel like, you know, if the other things happen, the audience will come.

The arts need to go through a transformative process. This whole aspect of competitiveness, competitiveness, competitiveness is killing us, uh, in many respects. We, we don't develop the relationships, um, and so therefore we don't [00:09:00] develop the understanding of diverse art forms. And for those who are more privileged, they don't develop the understanding of where, uh, why they are privileged and what that means, and how it blocks the growth of Canadian culture. So we still face it. Um, and in some organizations, we still face things like, uh, tokenistic approaches. Uh, "Oh, we want to work with CPAMO because we can put their name in our grant application and then we'll look good in front of a jury." We have to protect against that because we don't want our name used in that way.

We also face challenges, I think, in the real depth of what it means to take this work on. Um, many people want to check the boxes. Yep. Yep. We did this. We did that. We did that. We did that. Yeah, we got a Black person on stage. We got a South Asian person on stage, you know. But they don't change the organization and they throw that in front of funders and, you know, funders don't have, in my view, the internal [00:10:00] capacities to really assess who's doing good work in this area. They've set no standards. So a checklist looks good. "Our board is now more diverse, yay. Our programs look more, yay." But are you really, is the power really being shared? And you know, is this just a one day wonder, one year wonder and then next year where does it go? What's the longterm plan for change? Um, and that scares a lot of organizations, partially because they're nervous about their audiences. Will they lose people? Partially if they do make the change, will they then attract new people? Uh, and so rather than really sitting down and saying, "Hey, this is a long-term process where we have to build relationships with our current audience to say this some great work that we would like for you to see," and to build relationships with new audiences, to say, "We want to put your work on our stages in ways that are authentic and meaningful, [00:11:00] and to share so we can grow and understand who we are as Canadians through the arts." Um, those are still big challenges that we, uh, we face and that's going to be around for a while.

I really feel that, you know, the art that I create and that other artists I know—Indigenous, um, Black, People of Colour, um, others, D/deaf and Disabled—is really not understood. It's not part of the Canon. Um, it's not part of the standards of excellence that people don't talk about, but is built inside their head, which really is Eurocentric in many forms. Um, and that, um, you know, we are nowhere near where we should be in terms of the funding that we should be getting, uh, from public money. And this is public money. Um, and that is, uh, an ongoing concern.

If you've blocked people in the past, which the arts have done, then it's your job to make sure that they are actually at the same level of the organizations you currently work with, right? And so we're talking about organizations that have been around for 50, 60 years. [00:12:00] Uh, who have built up their funding base, who have built up their membership, who have built up their programs and services, who have built up their boards, who have built up their, uh, you know, relationship with funders and politicians. What does it mean to redistribute the dollars? And so when we put out the paper on equity, we were challenging white- led organizations, to basically say: if you're on board for this, now is the time to say so and to begin to give up some of your funding, so that we can be where you're at.

So we've got something coming in May. So we're calling it Gathering Divergence Multi-arts Festival and Conference Spring 2021. And the lead line is, "What Have We Learnt? Approaches, Lessons and Future Strategies Towards Anti Black Racism, Equity, Diversity, Inclusivity and Digital Supports in the Arts." It's a save the date thing that we are already sending out, because even though it's the week of May 17th, we want people to start setting their calendars [00:13:00] now. Um, and we also put out a call to artists to submit, uh, proposals. I know some things we're looking at right now are the, we're doing a toolkit on our digital arts strategy. Um, we've been doing, uh, various educational sessions. We've recorded all of them. So we want to have videos available and have them, and have them launched as part of that. Uh, we're doing some work where we want to invite a number of organizations that we've been working with. Everything from Peggy Baker Dance to Fall for Dance North, to Luminato, to the Ballet Company, to North York Arts, to come together for a session on what, what are the methodologies, where are the commonalities, that kind of, what have they gotten out of the process? We're in conversation with the city of Toronto to follow up on the Mayor's round table on Anti-Black Racism. We're, uh, we're, uh, uh, encouraging the city to name 2022 to 2032 as a Decade for Black Arts and [00:14:00] Culture in the city. That they also identify as city spaces that Black artists and Black arts organizations can use for minimal to no charge, uh, that they fund a Black-led arts organization to do research and advocacy. Uh, and that, you know, if there's any city body that's looking at this issue, at those issues, that that body needs to meet in public, um, and that it be supported by the advocacy organization, um, to, um, set up the agenda. We don't want to see Black artists co-opted by the city and get drowned in their bureaucracy. Not that they necessarily would, but this is a precaution and we've said to them, you know, you don't want that optic out there, that you've just co-opted a number of prominent Black artists, and we don't know what's going on. We want to make sure that the central point where we can come together as diverse, uh, as people from a diaspora, sometimes I don't think people truly understand what that means. And you think about Continental Africa, oh my God. How many cultures are there? So how do we have [00:15:00] a forum that we, as Black folk, can get to understand ourselves and not have us picking off, wanting to, you know, my ambition is my ambition as my— how do we work together? How do we work together? Yeah. So we want to do that with the mayor in December. Writing grants on this now, we want to talk about arts in the time of healing, the role of IBPOC artists in planetary renewal. And part of that choice is to say the West is killing this planet. If anything that COVID is teaching us right now, is that Mother Earth is saying enough. I have to lock you folks in. You look at, you know, how did we take care of ourselves before this glut of greed, um, hit us, um, through capitalism,

colonization, et cetera. How do we have our relationships with the earth, which gives us food, [00:16:00] oxygen, water, right? Why do we treat it as if it's a commodity? Those things we need to—and it really, we've heard many people, whether David Suzuki or Noam Chomsky, et cetera, say it'll be Indigenous peoples, because of the way they have lived, who can help us out of this process, out of this mess. So that's what we want to talk about. Um, you know, and aside from COVID you look at all the other things that have happened—hurricanes, tornadoes, you name it—and then combined with, you know, the killing of Muslims in Mosques or, you know, the attacks on Black churches, the fear of things like the Proud Boys or the Oath Keepers, the rise of, of this fanatic right wing, which is not so surprising when you think that what the West is really facing at this point in time is losing control of the race question. Look [00:17:00] at the Republicans in the States, what they've just done. 40 States bringing in restrictive voting laws. Who do they want to block? People who look like us, because it will—as Trump said, rightly, they will never win another election if voting rights are expanded. And the Republican party, rather than becoming more to the centre, has gone further to the right. It's basically talking about dictatorship. And we see it here with Erin O'Toole, Conservative leaders or a Conservative campaign, you know, people who are vying for the head of the Conservative Party. Openly racist stuff, openly racist stuff that they're out there saying. And that's our battle right now. So for me, the collaboration, the collective work between IBPOC artists is, is really important right now. We, we don't have a [00:18:00] moment to spare, um, you know, to push forward our agenda. Um, cause either it's we do it or we perish, um, there's not much choice left.