

INDIGENOUS DANCE IN THE 21st CENTURY

Government attempts to eliminate dance from Indigenous life ultimately failed. Today, Indigenous dance artists living in what is now Canada are a vital group of explorers and storytellers who not only tread in the footsteps of their ancestors but are also developing new movement languages to investigate and reflect themes, issues and stories of who they are as artists and the nations they represent. In this portrait gallery we present a small sample of artists from different Indigenous nations whose every footfall tramples on the legacy of the Indian Agents who tried to stop the dance.

Top row, left to right

Michael Greyeyes

Photo: Jeremy Mimmagh, courtesy of Michael Greyeyes

Michael Greyeyes (Plains Cree) is an actor, choreographer, director and educator. Selected directing credits include: *Pimootewin* (The Journey), the first Cree language opera with libretto by Tomson Highway for Soundstreams; *Almighty Voice and his Wife* (Native Earth Performing Arts); *The River* (Nakai Theatre); and *Seven Seconds* (2010 imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival). In 2010, he founded Signal Theatre and in 2011 premiered a new full-length dance-theatre work, *from thine eyes* (Enwave Theatre). In 2013, he created a new work for Signal, *Nôhkom* ('my grandmother' in Cree) that dramatized the experiences of his paternal grandmother during the Great Depression. Signal was commissioned to create *A Soldier's Tale* for the 2014 Canada Dance Festival at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa and, in 2017, premiered a major new dance opera, *Bearing*, for the Luminato Festival in Toronto. He is an Associate Professor in the Theatre Department at York University, where he teaches devised theatre. Professor Greyeyes is published in the *Canadian Theatre Review*, *Theatre Research in Canada*, and *Performing Indigeneity: New Essays on Canadian Theatre*, Vol. 5.

Marcus Merasty

Photo courtesy of Marcus Merasty

Marcus Merasty is from the Northern community of Pelican Narrows, Saskatchewan and is of Cree decent, or Assin'skowitziwak, meaning "people of the rocky area". His interest in dance began at the age of 19 after learning traditional Métis jigging. In 2014 he decided to pursue a career as a contemporary dance artist after working on the "Buffalo Pound Round Dance" with New Dance Horizons, a community-based project that explores the relationships between cultural narratives and contemporary art forms. Since then he has trained in theatre with Gordon Tootoosis Nîkânîwin Theatre, participated in the Indigenous Dance Residency at The Banff Centre, and performed in the Coastal First Nations Dance Festival in Vancouver. Marcus is currently in the Professional Program of The School of Contemporary Dancers (Winnipeg), where he will work towards his B.A. (Hons) in contemporary dance.

Santee Smith

Santee Smith in her work *NeoIndigenA* / Photo: David Hou, courtesy of Santee Smith

Tekaronhiákhwa Santee Smith is a multi-disciplinary artist from the Kahnyen'kehàka Nation, Turtle Clan, Six Nations of the Grand River. Santee completed six years at Canada's National Ballet School; Physical Education and Psychology degrees from McMaster University and a M.A. in Dance from York University. Santee premiered her first work *Kaha:wi* – a family creation story in 2004 and one year later founded Kaha:wi Dance Theatre which she has grown into an internationally renowned company. Her body of work includes 12 productions and over 11 short works. Other independent commissions include: National Arts Centre Orchestra's *I Lost My Talk*; Canadian Opera Company's *Louis Riel*; North American Indigenous Games; *Inter-Hoop* for Fall for Dance North; and her projects *Sewatonha ren* and upcoming dance for film. She is the recipient of the K.M. Hunter Award; Victor Martyn Lynch-Staunton Award; John Hobday Award; Hamilton Music Award for *Kaha:wi*; Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding Choreography in the Dance for *Susuriwka – willow bridge*, and a REVEAL Indigenous Arts Award. Santee is a sought-after teacher and speaker on Indigenous performance and culture. Her life and works have been the topic of TV and films including: *All Our Relations*; *Moccasins and Concrete: An Urban Native Story* and *Kaha:wi – Cycle of Life*.

Middle row, left to right

René Highway

Photo: Andrew Oxenham, Andrew Oxenham Photo Collection, Danse Collection Danse

René Highway was born in 1954 on a remote reserve in northern Manitoba. Of Cree descent, he was sent to a Catholic residential school at age five, followed by high school in Winnipeg. He had been introduced to dance through school tours by Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers. A performance by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet inspired René to up dancing himself. He began training at age 15 at the school of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet; he lied to his friends about this once-a-week class by telling them he was at the YMCA. He moved to Toronto in the early 1970s and trained for three years at Toronto Dance Theatre before joining the company in 1976. He also began to choreograph his own work, exploring his Indigenous ancestry at a time when this was uncommon. In 1978 he created *Round Dance*, inspired by Indigenous dance, for a Toronto Dance Theatre choreographic workshop. In the early 1980s he spent time teaching at the Indigenous theatre company Tukak in Denmark, which further fired his desire to create and better understand his own heritage. He frequently collaborated with his brother Tomson Highway on productions such as *New Song, New Dance* (1982), *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989). René returned to Toronto Dance Theatre in 1984 at the request of Artistic Director Kenny Pearl while also maintaining a freelance career. René used the idiom of modern dance to explore his ancestry while also developing a new movement vocabulary informed by the emotional experiences of his childhood and youth. René died in Toronto in 1990 but is remembered with fondness and respect by the dancers with whom he worked.

Brian Solomon

Photo: Ken Ewen, courtesy of Brian Solomon

Multiple Dora and Gemini Award nominated Brian Solomon is of Anishnaabe and Irish descent, from the Northern Ontario community Shebahonaning-Killarney. Solomon is a graduate of the School of Toronto Dance Theatre, and has an MA in Performance from the Laban Center (UK). He has presented his multidisciplinary works across Canada, Berlin, Ingolstadt, Bamberg, Seville, Edinburgh, Amsterdam and London. Solomon has performed for a multitude of companies and creators from Canada, the USA and Europe. He has taught for many arts institutions and companies, including one of Europe's foremost universities for acting, H.F.S. Ernst Busch, Berlin.

Margaret Grenier

Photo: Chris Randle, courtesy of Margaret Grenier

Margaret Grenier is of Gitksan and Cree ancestry. She is the Executive and Artistic Director for the Dancers of Damelahamid. She choreographed and produced the full-length works *Setting the Path* (2004) and *Sharing the Spirit* (2007), which toured internationally to New Zealand in 2008 and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, China. Margaret choreographed and produced *Visitors Who Never Left* in 2009, *Dancing our Stories* in 2010, *Spirit Transforming* in 2012, and *Flicker* in 2016. She has directed and produced the Coastal First Nations Dance Festival since 2008. Margaret holds a Masters of Arts in Arts Education from Simon Fraser University and was a sessional instructor at SFU in 2007, and a faculty member for the Banff Centre Indigenous Dance Residency in 2013. She has developed programs for the Bill Reid Art Gallery as well as the HR MacMillan Space Centre. Margaret presented at the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education on Aboriginal identity and dance in Australia in 2008, Peru in 2011, and Hawaii in 2015. She currently serves on the Executive Board of Directors for the Scotiabank Dance Centre and for the Canadian Dance Assembly.

Bottom row, left to right

Lara Kramer

Photo: Sylvain Verstricht, courtesy of Lara Kramer

Lara Kramer is the choreographer and artistic director of Lara Kramer Danse, based in Montreal. Lara is an Oji-Cree performer and choreographer whose work is intimately linked to memory and the effects of cultural genocide. Lara's work pushes the strength and fragility of the human spirit; it is political and potent. She has been presented at The First Peoples Festival, Montreal (2009); Festival Vue Sur la Relève, Montreal (2010); The Talking Sticks Festival, Vancouver (2011 & 2013); Canada Dance Festival, Ottawa (2011 & 2014); The Banff Centre (2011); Harbourfront Centre, Toronto (2011); Tangente, Montreal (2013 & 2015); Dancing on the Edge, Vancouver (2013 & 2014); New Dance Horizons, Regina (2014); Alberta Aboriginal Arts, Edmonton (2014); Expanse Movement Arts Festival, Edmonton (2015); Native Earth Performing Arts, Toronto (2015 & 2016); Espace Libre, Montreal (2016); Brown University, Providence, RI, USA (2016); and at YIRRAMBOI, Melbourne, Australia (2017). Her work *NGS* ("Native Girl Syndrome") was commissioned by the Canada Dance Festival and received an award for audacity from the OFFTA (2014). She has taught at the Indigenous Dance Residency at The Banff Centre, as well as in London, Toronto, Montreal, Regina, Edmonton and Vancouver.

Yvonne Chartrand

Yvonne Chartrand in her work *Eagle Spirit* / Photo: Yvonne Chew, courtesy of Yvonne Chartrand

Yvonne Chartrand is a choreographer and dancer as well as a national award-winning master Métis jigger. Her Michif (Métis) ancestors come from St. Laurent, Manitoba. She is the Artistic Director of V'ni Dansi, whose name translates as "Come and Dance" in Michif. As a contemporary dance choreographer she has conceptualized and co-choreographed company group works: *A Poet and Prophet* in 2003 inspired by the poetry and visions of Louis Riel; *Gabriel's Crossing* in 2004 inspired by Madeleine and Gabriel Dumont during the Northwest Resistance; and *The Crossing* in 2006 (a dance trilogy inspired by these earlier works), written and directed by Maria Campbell. *The Crossing* inspired two Artist and Community Collaboration Projects in Saskatoon with Maria Campbell, which included performances in July 2007 and 2008 at the Batoche National Historical Site of Canada. The 2008 Batoche project received an award for creative excellence from Tourism Saskatchewan. Her first full-length dance-theatre work *Cooking It Up Métis*, created for young audiences, has toured extensively to schools throughout B.C. Her solo works include: *Marguerite*, a solo that honours Métis women through an exploration of the life of Marguerite Monet dit Bellemeur, wife of Métis leader Louis Riel; *Stories from St. Laurent*, inspired by stories gathered from six Elders in her ancestral community of St. Laurent, Manitoba; and *Eagle Spirit*, her most recent work, visiting universal themes of grief, death and rebirth. *Eagle Spirit* premiered in Vancouver last year at V'ni Dansi's 11th Annual Louis Riel Day Celebration. Her commissioned solo *Sara Riel*; *The Long Journey* was created by her choreographic mentor Robin Poitras and Edward Poitras, and premiered in Regina in 2014; the work then toured to Edmonton and Winnipeg in 2016. Yvonne was awarded a 2011 Victor Martyn Lynch-Staunton Award from the Canada Council for the Arts.