

God of Gods:  
A Canadian Play  
September 4 –  
November 30, 2019

Art  
Museum

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**A Project by**  
Deanna Bowen

Curated by Barbara Fischer

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**Essay by**  
Maya Wilson-Sanchez

Produced on the occasion of  
the Hart House Centennial



# HART HOUSE THEATRE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Director: BERTRAM FORSYTH

SEASON  
1921-22

Dramatic Editor  
of the *Standard World*.

Dear Sir—For two years we have followed the performances at Hart House Theatre without admiring a production, and have read your issue in *The Standard World* almost from the time *The Maid and Empire* acquired the pages. As members of the ordinary theatre-going, critical, reading public, might we offer you our own impressions of the play you dealt with in issue "Week-end Thoughts of a Monday Masher" in your issue of yesterday. That they do not in all points coincide with your own is one of the reasons that might possibly make you find them not without interest.

We have not had the advantage of reading D. H. Lawrence's "Magna," but if the performance of it did nothing else, it definitely established Professor Madler Williams as something more than a good amateur. One had always felt previously that being sharply cast in parts that suit of his own composition. After watching his skilfully litidate *Diana*, one felt that one would like to see his versatility given more scope in a more ambitious part.

To the *Chicago* criticism we went in professed loyalty because we had heard of the national changes, and remembered Mr. Mitchell's production with delight. We found in Mr. Forsyth's conception, a sense of color, composition, and historical sympathy that changed our prejudices in admiration. The *Machetes* group in the second part satisfied every sense of art and reverence, and made the Latin phrases of previous years appear an Italian interjection into an English conversation. One found with relief, too, the sudden return of the King, that had seemed as if it would never finish its slow stretch on and off, and found the introduction of the contemporary English figure a welcome and more artistic solution. After all, the *Chicago* *Machetes* are an old English creation, and one feels that to give them a continental English atmosphere, Mr. Forsyth has improved on their previous Italian authenticity. One wonders, too, if a production *Twelve* on the slope of the High Altar was always quite content with the earlier scenes of last of the audience seat have had for the Secretary.

"The Magna" if nothing else, was an example of what happens to

over-nationalized drama. To a West Country Englishman it was a delight. One wonders if a "Canadian" would have cared for it. In Canada it was a literary curiosity that has manifestly guided the critics. I believe of Professor Pughan Edgerton, who felt that "only that drama that interprets the Canadian people to themselves should be sought for and encouraged" might consider it not without profit.

One happens to know of the backstage equipment of Hart House. One appreciates the work done, in part, like the "God of Gods" it is manifestly appropriate. But, as you truly say, Mr. Forsyth has bought himself this season with the education of good actors and actresses. After all, the stage of the human, who skilfully used to the compelling power of the legitimate stage. Productions are no substitute for art, and only artists when they are offered to cover up work that couldn't stand without them. Perhaps next year, when Mr. Forsyth has a second trained company to rely on, he may turn his attention more to the mechanical side of the theatre.

After thus disagreeing with you through four paragraphs, may we end by authoritatively agreeing with all you say about *Twelve* "Howards" etc. The only thing further we feel inclined to add is the ad-



mission of a wonder who then ever wrote it, and whether, if correct also had, anyone would have produced it. Beyond a portrait of the monument of such spirit, and that has been written down by whom, we find it had anything to do. That of course, may have been our own fault, but there the fact remains.

Yours faithfully,  
TWO OF THE AUDIENCE

## God of Gods: A Canadian Play

Cover: Frederick Coates,  
Sketchbook containing *The God  
of Gods* Hart House Theatre  
Programme, Reviews, and  
Drawings, 1922. Courtesy of  
University of Toronto Archives,  
Frederick Coates Fonds,  
B1975-0015/008.

Right: Production Still from  
*The God of Gods*, Hart House  
Theatre, 1922, Toronto, Canada.  
University of Toronto Archives,  
Hart House Theatre Fonds,  
A1975-0009-/013P (God of  
Gods).



Internationally renowned,  
Toronto-based artist  
Deanna Bowen revisits  
*The God of Gods* (1919)



Juliette Gaultier wearing a Nootka cedar bark cape in a Town Hall promotional photo in New York City, 1927. Canadian Museum of History, 97-608.



Deanna Bowen, *Deconstructing The God of Gods: A Canadian Play*, 2019, video, 2h 24min. Production still of Archer Pechawis, Peter Morin, Lisa Myers, John G. Hampton, and cheyanne turions in conversation.

For her exhibition at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House, Deanna Bowen revisits *The God of Gods* (1919), a play written and directed by Carroll Aikins (1888–1967), founder of the first national theatre in Canada and artistic director of Hart House Theatre (1927–29). Aikins's play, staged at Hart House in 1922, projected the horrors of war into a loose adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*—using “native” motifs. Deanna Bowen's film features a conversation between Indigenous artists and writers John G. Hampton, Peter Morin, Lisa Myers, Archer Pechawis, and cheyanne turions,

held on the Hart House Theatre stage in the spring of Hart House's Centennial year.

Deanna Bowen is a descendant of the Alabama- and Kentucky-born Black Prairie pioneers of Amber Valley and Campsie, Alberta. Bowen's family history has been the central pivot of her auto-ethnographic interdisciplinary works since the early 1990s. Her broader artistic/educational practice examines history, historical writing, and the ways in which artistic and technological advancements impact individual and collective authorship.



Frederick Varley, A.Y. Jackson, Lawren Harris, Barker Fairley, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, and J.E.H. MacDonald, *Arts & Letters*, c.1924, Toronto, Canada. University of Toronto Archives, University College Archives Fonds, A2016-0040/P.

## God of Gods: A Canadian Play

Commissioned to consider the one-hundredth anniversary of Hart House, Toronto-based artist Deanna Bowen responds to the play *The God of Gods*, which was performed at Hart House Theatre in 1922. Using “native” motifs and casting White actors in red-face to stage theosophist ideas about religion and politics, the play was written by Carroll Aikins, the future director of Hart House Theatre and leader of the Little Theatre movement in Canada. Aikins’s “nationalist pandering caught the eye of Hart House’s Board of Syndics,”<sup>1</sup> and *The God of Gods* was presented as an example of seminal Canadian theatre in the 1926–27 book *Canadian Plays from Hart House Theatre*, edited by Hart House founder and Governor General Vincent Massey. In 2016, *The God of Gods* script was published as part of the research initiative Editing Modernism in Canada Project through the University of Ottawa Press, and thus continues to be celebrated as an important play in Canadian history.

Using excerpts from her 2013 artwork *The 1911 Anti Creek-Negro Petition and The God of Gods* as a contextual framework, Bowen’s project explores the social networks that heavily influenced the formation of Canadian culture in the early twentieth century. The exhibition visualizes the individuals involved in this formation by examining their archived books, plays, letters, exhibitions, and music, as well as their political appointments and their founding of institutions such as Hart House, the Arts and Letters Club, and the Art Gallery of Ontario. Bowen’s familial past intertwines with this moment of Canadian history. In 1911, the Cabinet of Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier proposed a ban on Black immigration. In that same year, thousands of individuals signed a petition in support of this order, stating that migrants of African and Indigenous descent coming from Southern

states were not welcome in Canada. Among the signatures in the petition is that of Barker Fairley, professor at the University of Toronto and friend to Vincent Massey and the Group of Seven painters. Bowen’s exhibition highlights the nature of an emerging Canadian identity as one shaped by nationalist, White, and settler ideals. Her project maps how colonial ideas about Indigenous cultures and cultural production were mobilized to create a national aesthetic.

Aikins was a part of a circle of influential figures in the world of arts and culture in Toronto during the 1920s and 1930s. They included Massey, whose 1951 Royal Commission resulted in the creation of the Canada Council of the Arts and the National Library. He asserted that “the death of true Indian arts is inevitable” and proposed that the department of Indigenous Affairs be responsible for Indigenous cultural practices.<sup>2</sup> Aikins’s and Massey’s social circle included the Group of Seven painters A.J. Casson, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer, Lawren Harris, and J.E.H. MacDonald, as well as a constellation of artists, writers, and society figures whose names appear throughout the exhibition.

Aikins’s play is steeped in primitivism, an attitude manufactured by European colonial thought that positioned Indigenous cultures as naïve precursors to civilization. Primitivist art therefore tells us more about the West than it does about Indigenous peoples, and it is found throughout the formation of Canadian cultural production in the early twentieth century. These depictions were part of an ecology of performance repertoires where White people dressed in red-face not only for plays, but also for public performances and entertainment such as OCAD University’s Beaux Art Balls of 1925 and 1930, where Toronto’s elite painted

their faces and dressed in so-called Indigenous costumes. In 1927 the anthropologist Marius Barbeau, part of this elite social circle, organized *Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, the first exhibition to include work by Indigenous artists alongside work by the Group of Seven and others. The exhibition positioned Indigenous works as belonging to the past, while positing work by settler artists as modern, drawing from the Indigenous works to create a new Canadian visual language. Two ethnographic films by Barbeau that perpetuate a salvage paradigm were presented alongside the exhibition, as well as concerts of “Indian folk songs” by mezzo soprano and ethnomusicologist Juliette Gaultier de la Vérendrye, who performed in red-face in front of screens painted by Langdon Kihn and village scenery by Arthur Lismer wearing Indigenous clothing borrowed from the National Museum of Canada and the American Museum of Natural History.<sup>3</sup>

In 1929, Canadian composer Ernest MacMillan collaborated with Barbeau and wrote that “[t]he ancient melodies of West Coast tribes” would “without a doubt be totally lost in the course of thirty or forty years but for the energy and enthusiasm of a handful of collectors.”<sup>4</sup> These writers, politicians, artists, publishers, and poets believed Indigenous cultures were inevitably doomed to extinction, and saw their role as that of preservationists, even if this included racist representations and the theft of cultural objects for museum collections. Indigenous cultural production was understood as a resource for White artists at the same time as Indigenous communities were being persecuted for practicing their own cultural traditions.



Installation view, *Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, January 7–January 29, 1928, Art Gallery of Toronto. Photo: AGO.

This exhibition brings attention to the discriminatory foundations of Canadian culture. It also presents a counter narrative. Bowen has staged and recorded a conversation between herself and Indigenous artists and curators John G. Hampton, Peter Morin, Lisa Myers, Archer Pechawis, and Cheyanne turions addressing Aikins’s play and the construction of Canadian art history. Held on the very same stage where *The God of Gods* was performed a century ago, the discussion highlights the continued survival of Indigenous peoples and the necessity for more critical considerations of the construct of Canadian culture. It shifts the focus from the acts of White Canadians to imagine a Canadian culture in which Indigenous cultural production flourishes.

- Maya Wilson-Sanchez

1. “Carroll Aikins,” Hart House Theatre: A Dramatic History, accessed July 4, 2019, [https://harthouse.hackinghistory.ca/?post\\_type=hh\\_people&p=94#inref-94-6](https://harthouse.hackinghistory.ca/?post_type=hh_people&p=94#inref-94-6).

2. Canada, *Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences*, by Vincent Massey (Ottawa, ON: King’s Printer, 1951), 240–42. <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/massey/h5-434-e.html>

3. Correspondence from Marius Barbeau to Edward Greig, 4 February 1928, and correspondence from Edward Greig to Marius Barbeau, 6 February 1928, Art Gallery of Ontario Archives, Exhibitions: Curatorial Records, *Canadian West Coast Art-Native and Modern*, Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Judith Klassen, “The Complicated Case of Juliette Gaultier de la Vérendrye,” Canadian Museum of History, March 17, 2015, <https://www.historymuseum.ca/blog/the-complicated-case-of-juliette-gaultier-de-la-verendrye/>.

4. Ernest MacMillan, “Introduction,” *Three Indian Folk Songs*, 1929.

\* This essay uses contemporary names for institutions that have had different names in the past.

## Opening Event

### Reception

Wednesday, September 4, 2019, 6–8pm  
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

## Public Programs

### Deanna Bowen and Maya Wilson-Sanchez in Conversation

On mining the archive for the play  
*The God of Gods*  
Saturday, September 28, 2019, 3pm  
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

### Deanna Bowen Artist Talk

Wednesday, October 16, 2019, 6pm  
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

### Deanna Bowen and Jill Carter in Conversation

Deanna Bowen, artist, and Jill Carter, curator and director *Encounters at the “Edge of the Woods”* discuss process-based work  
Wednesday, November 6, 2019, 6pm  
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

### Drop-In Tours

Led by student-docents

#### Fall Exhibitions Tour

Every Tuesday, 2pm  
Meet at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

#### Malcove Collection Tour

Last Wednesday of each month, 12 noon  
University of Toronto Art Centre

#### Hart House Collection Tour

Last Wednesday of each month, 2pm  
Meet at the Hart House information desk

Group tours may be booked by contacting us at [artmuseum@utoronto.ca](mailto:artmuseum@utoronto.ca)

For program details visit [artmuseum.utoronto.ca](http://artmuseum.utoronto.ca)

## Staff

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Flash Reproductions, Printing  
Ruth Jones, Copy Editor

## About the Author

Maya Wilson-Sanchez is a writer, researcher, and curator based in Toronto. Her writing has been published in *The Senses & Society Journal*, *Canadian Art*, the *Journal of Visual and Critical Studies*, and in the anthology *Other Places: Reflections on Media Arts Practices in Canada* (PUBLIC Books, 2019). Maya has worked in collections, research, programming, and curatorial research roles at Gallery TPW, the Art Gallery of Ontario, OCAD University, Onsite Gallery, Xpace Cultural Centre, and the Royal Ontario Museum. Her research for Deanna Bowen’s *God of Gods: A Canadian Play* significantly contributed to the formation of this exhibition and all its contents. Maya is the inaugural recipient of the Art Museum’s Curatorial Residence Award.

## Visiting the Art Museum

### Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

7 Hart House Circle  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H3  
416.978.8398

### University of Toronto Art Centre

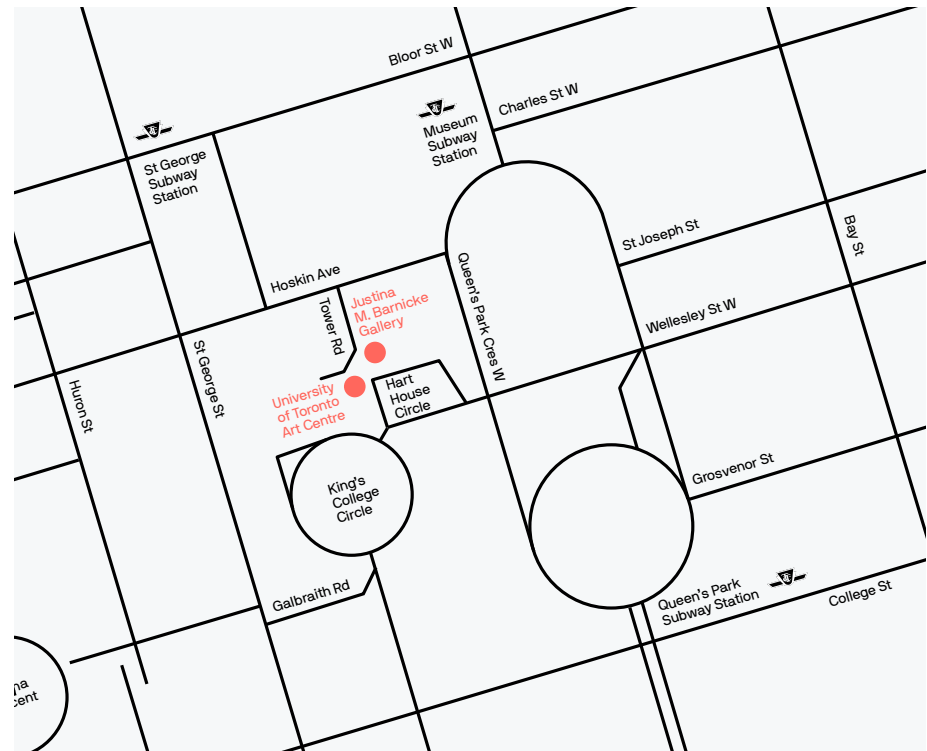
15 King’s College Circle  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H7  
416.978.1838

Wheelchair access to University College, and therefore the Art Museum’s University of Toronto Art Centre location, will be closed due to University College building revitalization. Accommodations for accessibility are available upon request.

Tuesday	Noon–5pm
Wednesday	Noon–8pm
Thursday	Noon–5pm
Friday	Noon–5pm
Saturday	Noon–5pm
Sunday	Closed
Monday	Closed

Closed on statutory holidays. Class tours and group bookings by appointment.  
Admission is FREE.

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