



KELLY THORNTON

Woman of Distinction 2008 Arts and Letters



Kelly Thornton is a trailblazer. Commanding and determined, she has focused her professional career on advancing the lives of women and girls in theatre. Advocating change while demonstrating the power of women's artistic vision, Kelly has produced a long list of plays by, for and about women, at the same time as she has addressed male domination within the art form through organizing and research.

Recognized by a plethora of nominations and awards, the works she produces also challenge the status quo of artistic vision, displacing the centrality of the male experience. Artistic Director of Nightwood Theatre, Kelly makes a home for women developing artistic careers.

Kelly Thornton's tenure has been marked by a clear emphasis on opening the doors of theatre to new generations of talented women. She has made youth initiatives a mainstay at Nightwood, with programs such as Write from the Hip for novice playwrights aged 18 to 29, and Busting Out, for teen girls 12 to 16 who are mentored using theatre as a tool for empowerment, self-discovery and self-confidence. Expanding on the founding principles of Nightwood Kelly's vision has raised the company's profile to Canada's national women's theatre. She co-founded the largest interdisciplinary festival of women's talent in North America - Hysteria, she has toured her work internationally, and she continues to develop powerful stories by women from across the country. The artistically diverse repertoire Kelly Thornton supports has given rise to some of the best and most astonishing new Canadian theatre: Djanet Sears' *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*, Sonja Mills' *The Danish Play*, Marjorie Chan's *China Doll*, Lisa Codrington's *Cast Iron*, Diane Flacks' *Bear With Me* and Linda Griffiths' *Age of Arousal*. Leading from the centre of a highly dedicated team, Kelly Thornton exemplifies artistic leadership supporting fresh voices and new vision.

Using theatre to challenge stereotypes and social assumptions about race, gender and sexuality, Kelly Thornton takes risks -demanding that our common world be bolder, richer and more honest. By investing in the budding talent of emerging young women, Kelly has placed box office certainty behind artistic innovation to bring Canadians something they hadn't seen before. Her vision has paid off, and playwrights such as Marjorie Chan and Lisa Codrington have earned Governor General's Award nominations for works nurtured by Nightwood. Countless other young artists have gone on from their incubation at Nightwood to successful and prominent careers in Canadian arts and letters. But



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individual success is not the endpoint of this dream. Kelly is campaigning on behalf of women theatre practitioners to artistic leaderships across Canada, to boards of directors and the government bodies that fund them in the national study she launched, Equity in Canadian Theatre: The Women's Initiative. With the evidence of this study, showing that while women are the primary ticket buyers for Canadian theatres, the leadership, structures and stories brought to stage in this field are overwhelmingly biased toward men.

Producing plays from myriad women's perspectives, be it written exclusively in Bajan dialect, about queer parenting, or from the interior monologue of a black girl having a crisis of faith in a pioneer community in Ontario all show Kelly Thornton as a woman who challenges us to embrace a new vision for the world. Her rare ability is to communicate cutting edge approaches and fresh social vision through the power of art.