

# Scripts of CHANGE

Northwestern students and faculty aim to decolonize classical theater, opera and ballet works.

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## PROGRAMME

### ACT I. *'On Decolonizing Theatre'*

### ACT II. *Northwestern's curriculum*

### ACT III. *What does decolonization look like?*

### ACT IV. *The future of theater*

Communication third-year Yuni Mora stepped into Shanley Pavilion her freshman year ready to see one of her first plays at Northwestern: the student theatre group Lovers & Madmen's take on *Much Ado About Nothing*. But this was far from a traditional rendition of the Shakespearean classic.

Taking in the vibrant colors adorning the stage and the cast of predominantly people of color, Mora says she had never seen a Shakespeare production like this.

"It opened my eyes to what theater is and what theater could do," Mora says.

In the Lovers & Madmen production, the cast and crew transported audience members to modern-day Miami, in a reimagined world where the cast was as diverse as the city's population. With dancing, interjections of Spanish ad-libs and a palpable sense of Latin culture, this performance shifted away from the classic rendition usually set in Elizabethan England.

Traditional Western playwrights and composers are ever-present in the performing arts scene. In fact, for music and theatre students, a core element of their curriculum is classical works,

many of which include themes that are now considered problematic. As performing arts companies update these works through their interpretations, Northwestern's music and theatre communities consider the role these shows play in both performance and academic settings.

### ACT I. *'On Decolonizing Theatre'*

This academic year, Northwestern is hosting "On Decolonizing Theatre," a series of public seminars that examine theater, opera and ballet works from the late 17th to early 19th centuries. Funded by the Mellon Foundation, the year-long project aims to address colonialism, imperialism, racism, patriarchy and misogyny present in early works, as well as inspire conversations on how theater, opera and ballet can become more inclusive and culturally sensitive.

Barber Professor of Performing Arts and Professor of English and

Theatre Tracy Davis is the co-principal investigator of the seminar. She conceived the idea during the COVID-19 pandemic, which shut down live theater, concerts and operas worldwide.

Davis says this artistic silence, along with the Black Lives Matter movement, allowed the performing arts community to reflect on its role in addressing issues of social justice, diversity and inclusion. Calls for works by individuals from marginalized backgrounds increased, and Davis says such discussions set the stage for critical re-evaluations of classical works containing problematic elements.

The Mellon Foundation and Northwestern accepted her seminar proposal, and now Davis leads the project with co-principal investigators Jesse Rosenberg and Ivy Wilson — both professors at the University — and postdoctoral fellows Caroline Gleason-Mercier and Keary Watts.

"Together, we've spent a lot of time talking about how we can ... create a situation at Northwestern where people can come from many different disciplinary perspectives and talk about, experience and contribute to how the performing arts can be involved in the work of

decolonization," Davis says.

The conversations examine how theater and music communities can increase the inclusivity of works such as Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, which are established in performance canon and may have been progressive for their time, yet remain undergirded by colonial dynamics and racist themes.

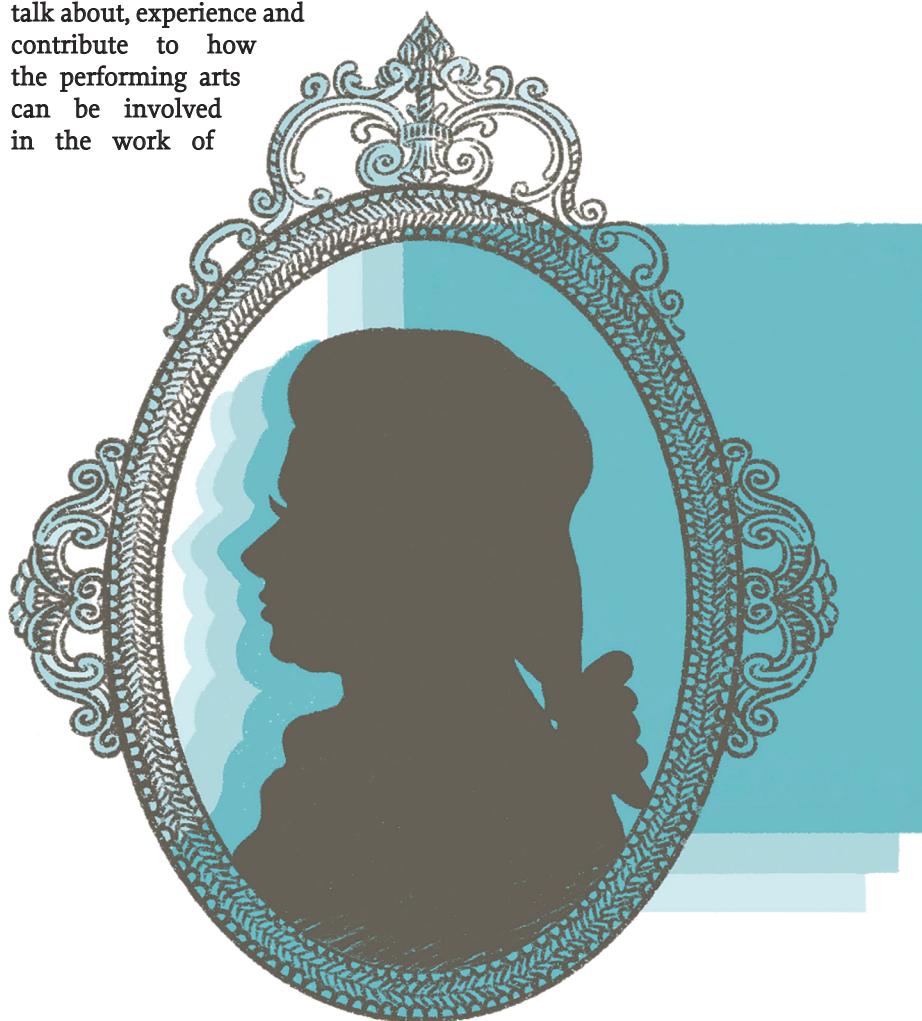
The seminars feature a panel of speakers, ranging from performers to producers of modern adaptations of these classical productions. After the panelists take questions from the seminar leaders, attendees can direct their own questions to the panelists or voice their opinions.

Gleason-Mercier says ultimately, the project's goal is to foster dialogue examining how modern productions of canonical works may be "recoded" to resist or decenter old ideologies.

Davis says she hopes these discussions will help influence the ways people teach these canonic works and fulfill everybody's obligation to "work on anti-racist, anti-discriminatory diversity and inclusion measures in our pedagogy."

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- Tracy Davis  
Barber Professor of Performing Arts and Professor of English and Theatre



## ACT II. Northwestern's curriculum

Controversial works are often embedded into music and theatre students' curricula. Such works are considered part of classical canon: the body of art that is considered notable, has stood the test of time and is well-known by most people.

Bienen students are required to take "The Classical Canon," a course that aims to further examine pieces of music and their characterization as "classical."

Jesse Rosenberg, a Northwestern professor who teaches "Opera and Race," says he believes efforts to address these problematic issues in introductory courses, including "The Classical Canon,"

is indicative of progress, though he adds, "We have a long way to go."

"The habits of concert-going [and] these entrenched attitudes about what kind of music is worth paying attention to — it's very much part of a culture that is inculcated into many people," Rosenberg says.

Students also believe there are more steps needed to fully diversify the curriculum.

Bienen and Communication third-year Rushil Byatnal says he believes these works should still be taught in the curriculum, though he adds that there should be more efforts to incorporate diverse works currently designated to elective classes.

"I feel there should be a push to bring these out of specialized little pockets and bring them into our general canon," Byatnal says. "Because no one puts Shakespeare into a little thing. Shakespeare is the big meal, you know?"

The theatre department's acting sequence includes a year of learning acting techniques and a second year interacting with texts, with students studying Greek works in the fall, Shakespeare in the winter and contemporary works in the spring.

Mora, a Theatre and Latina and Latino Studies double major, is currently taking a class on Greek theatrical texts. According to Mora, professors in the department are free to teach these works in the way they think is best, meaning there are no guidelines on teaching the historical backgrounds of these works.

Even though Mora says her professor has incorporated folklore and ritual texts from other cultures, she says some professors might not put in this effort, instead teaching only about Greek texts.

"There's sort of an imbalance in the education different students are getting," Mora says.

Mora also acknowledges that at this time in the theatre industry, it's necessary to be educated on these Western, foundational works. However, like Byatnal, she believes more diverse works should be incorporated into the curriculum, especially if the department wants to make the program more diverse and inclusive.

"So much of that is not just admitting more POC or minority students. It's

also re-analyzing what you're teaching them, because if you're not teaching your students texts and techniques they connect to, then it's all for nothing," Mora says.

Byatnal says through conversations with his peers, he feels other students share similar beliefs on how curricula should address these works.

"I think no one necessarily wants to take these works from the canon because that's just less education and less awareness of our history in society and in this world," Byatnal says. "There is just a general need to bring in more."

From his experience as a double major in the School of Communication and Bienen, Byatnal says he's noticed a difference in the way each school approaches these topics.

According to Byatnal, the School of Communication "is more willing to adapt and does adapt," while Bienen — and music culture in

and Bach are considered "classical music" around the world, despite each country having its own traditional "classical" music.

"That is a direct effect of colonialism, where these composers that were the greatest were passed down into these cultures and the other traditional, classical genres specific to those regions were kind of swept under the rug," he says.



general — doesn't always properly address how these works achieved their status today.

"This is reflective of Bienen's old culture, which is very stagnant and very traditional in many ways," he says, noting that works by European composers such as Beethoven

## ACT III. What does decolonization look like?

During Byatnal's time at Northwestern, he has noticed student groups often address the historical backgrounds of these works in a more "responsible" way than Northwestern productions, which he speculates could be a result of student productions being "less institutionalized."

"Northwestern student productions do it the best because there's just a lot more initiative taken, and I think students feel a lot more responsible to make other students feel welcome," he says.

Mora, who is on the executive board of Vibrant Colors Collective — Northwestern's multicultural theatre board — says she has also noticed this, preferring to participate in student-led productions rather than Northwestern's.

This fall, Vibrant Colors put on *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, a musical about a fictional spelling bee. Though this musical does not have a race-specific cast, Mora says Vibrant Colors has an all-POC cast and production team.

For her, watching one of the rehearsals was "eye-opening," as it represented a dream of hers and her friends: a space to just exist in their bodies.

"We didn't have to be tokenized, and we didn't have to be the 'other' in the room, because everyone in that room looks like you or shares your same experiences," she says. "You get to share that, and you get to create something beautiful out of it."

To Byatnal and Mora, this concept reflects a broader sentiment that resonates with Watts' emphasis on the need to examine power structures and decision-making processes of institutions in order to take meaningful steps toward decolonization.

For the performing arts community, Watts says decolonization goes beyond mere representation and inclusion and involves granting complete artistic control to Indigenous artists and people of color. It means empowering marginalized communities through significant roles in the arts that allow them to redefine narratives and practices.

"What I hope is that our approach to performance and performance training can become broadened to include

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- Rushil Byatnal  
Communication  
and Bienen  
third-year

alternative modes of professionalization," Watts says. "How can we incorporate Indigenous and Africanist and non-Western ways of training into our curricula that are genuine and uplifting rather than fetishizing and othering?"

Gleason-Mercier underlines that decolonization initiates a set of questions that scrutinize established norms and practices in the theatrical and operatic world. In the context of the musical world, Gleason-Mercier acknowledges that people have a "deep connection" with music and "feel very emotionally invested in it."

This emotional investment in classical works can make it challenging for some to consider any form of alteration or reinterpretation. However, Gleason-Mercier says this resistance to change should not deter the performing arts community from engaging in these conversations.

"If we're going to challenge systemic injustices, and we're going to challenge structures that have created injustices, we have to be conscious in that," Gleason-Mercier says. "It can't just be a byproduct."

For instance, last February, Northwestern staged its production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* — an opera that contains racist elements such as the character Monostatos, who was

historically played by a white actor in blackface. In Bienen's production, the program included a section written by cast members dedicated to explaining the racism in the show and emphasizing the importance of engaging in conversations.

Melanie Stapleton, a second-year graduate student, says she believes program notes, such as the one in Northwestern's *The Magic Flute*, are a good way to address these issues without abandoning the work altogether, especially when the performers are actively involved in the process.

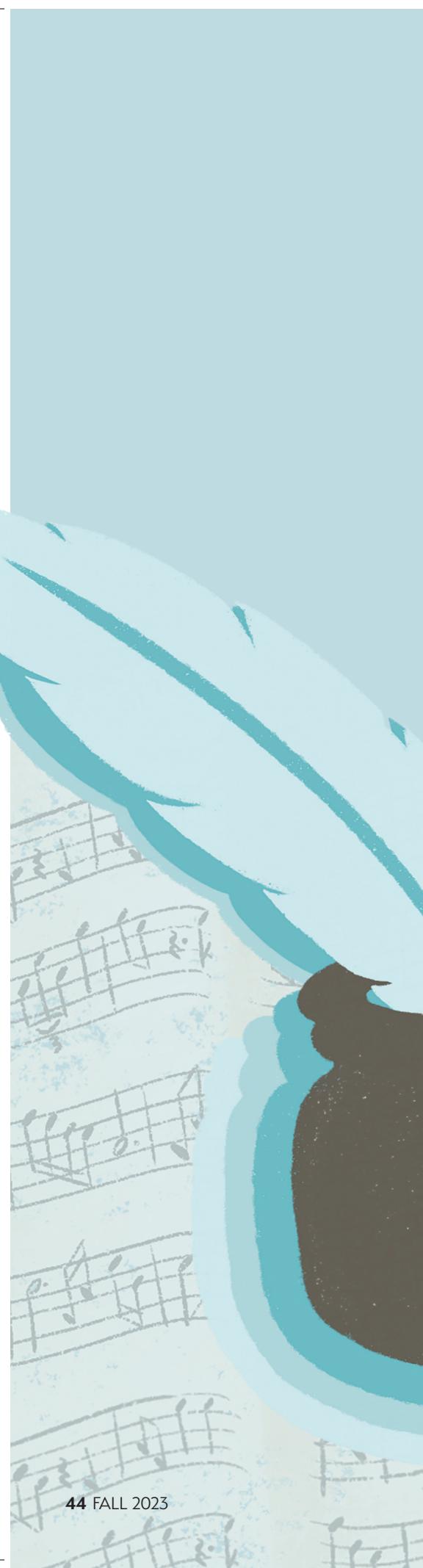
Mora also spoke on the importance of listening to cast members who are people of color when producing these shows.

"Being a person of color in a play that you know wasn't written for you and you were never intended to be in is extremely draining, more draining than it would be for any white person to be in a show like that," she says.

Despite this, Mora emphasized the importance of considering whether it's necessary to produce these shows, urging productions to ask if there's a different, more inclusive show that shares the same message.

Davis makes clear that the "On Decolonizing Theatre" group isn't saying there is an easy solution to decolonizing theater. Rather, "it is very much in process."





"We're not there yet, but we have the opportunity of the excitement, of stumbling along and trying to figure it out, of having the imperative to figure it out," Davis says.

Gleason-Mercier also noted that people do not have to have a full understanding of decolonization to attend the seminar. In fact, she encourages discussions with people questioning the meaning of decolonization, even if they are worried they'll "say the wrong thing."

"I would encourage people to be brave and come and learn and put that fear aside, because that's the only way I ultimately see us all growing from projects like this," she says.

Disputing the negative connotations associated with the word "ignorant," Stapleton says it's important to encourage dialogue and education because it's a matter of taking the time to educate oneself.

To a similar end, Stapleton is the founder of Blurring the Binary, a website dedicated to bridging the gap between music educators and transgender students. In February, Stapleton is presenting in Texas, where she has experience teaching on how to responsibly include social change in a high school curriculum. This presentation will include the importance of taking

the time to learn the history of a work and understanding how these performances could affect marginalized groups.

"Sometimes we're very quick to cast judgment, and sometimes people just didn't know better," she says. "And I don't think that's a crime."

## ACT IV. *The future of theater*

Emphasizing a push for groups to work together instead of against each other, Mora says there is a sense of determination among theatre students "to restructure what producing theater looks like."

"It's great to see that we all have this common goal of making student theatre at Northwestern a better place, not just for ourselves, but for the people who come after us," she says.

But decolonization does not come without its challenges. Some are hesitant to criticize these iconic works. Watts, though, says he believes this project is about "updating" and "engaging with culture."

Despite resistance, the project leaders are hopeful that these seminars will spark discussions in the performing arts community, especially within education. Davis says the vast repertoire the seminar examines will help move these conversations outside of the performing arts sphere.

"The ideas that come up in these performances are ideas that we should be talking about in our classrooms and at lunch tables and when you go home at Thanksgiving," Davis says. "All these things are our topics that shouldn't just exist on the arts pages of the newspaper. They are central to our lives." 