

# From a Living Room to a National Network: The Story of Got Your Back

by Thalia Gonzalez Kane with Marcia Johnson

In May 2017, Martha Burns and Thalia Gonzalez Kane gathered a group of ten female-identifying artists, at various stages in their careers, to discuss the state of the performing arts industry and the ways we could become stronger allies to one another. Over the course of that evening, wine was poured, snacks were eaten, discussions were had, and, at the end of the night, email addresses were being exchanged. We knew that we had found something special and that it was essential for our community to continue. This was the beginning of Got Your Back.

In that room, there were actors who had performed on every major stage in Canada, and onscreen in TV and film, actors who had just graduated from theatre school, actors still in theatre school, actors who had been kicked out of theatre school. There was a sense of vulnerability in the room, regardless of career status. Making ourselves vulnerable comes with the territory as we constantly “put ourselves out there.” That evening, the vulnerability subsided, and labels dissolved. This gathering was unique in that it was a group of folks who likely wouldn’t have met in a place that wasn’t a rehearsal room or a theatre; the pressure of appearances did not exist. The safety and comfort of a living room allowed people to connect simply as artists and people. The “Living Room” model is one that remains a key component in Got Your Back and has, from day one, been the core of the Got Your Back mission: creating safe places for artists to gather and connect face to face.

Over the course of the summer of 2017, the demand to meet grew. The first gathering was planned after an early-career artist sought career advice from an established artist: one artist opening up and confiding in another about the struggles they faced in the industry, and the other asking about ways they could help and support. Very soon after this initial meeting, the Harvey Weinstein allegations became headlines, and the #MeToo movement began to sweep through the country. Doors that were being held shut began to open as artists began to seriously discuss and question the issues surrounding harassment and codes of conduct in our industry. Artists began talking openly about past experiences and questioning what had been the status quo for so long. Enough had finally become enough. It was time we organized another Living Room, offering a safe space to discuss our feelings about the

industry as it was and what we wanted from it moving forward. It was time to form a support network for any artist who needed one. The number of folks doubled, and we continued on, meeting every couple of months to bring topics of concern to light, ask questions and, most important, strengthen the connections of our community. In the past two years, the group has grown, and Got Your Back now has a presence in Alberta, British Columbia, the East Coast, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. We’ve also branched out from Toronto to connect with the communities in Niagara-on-the-Lake and Stratford. If an artist is in need of support, there is now a network of over 1,000 people they can reach out to across the country.

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What exactly is Got Your Back Canada (GYB)? It is a network and community for artists in Canada. It is artists talking to each other—on a social media platform, in a living room, in our regions, and across the country. It’s a way for us to connect for advice, for inspiration, for advocacy. We strive to give artists strength to stand up for themselves and for each other; to give artists the strength to ask for guidance or help from members of the community. We are a group of artists striving to uphold standards in our workplaces and in our training institutions, to uphold mental and emotional health, working protocol, and gender equity standards in our workplaces and in our training institutions. These standards have been disregarded for far too long, and we are working toward bringing these to the forefront and giving them the focus and attention they deserve. The goal is to learn about the inner workings of theatre policies and codes in order to offer suggestions as to how to improve them for the artists they affect. We strive to make the information available to artists across the

country via our website, social media, and in-person gatherings. We are artists coming together for change. The time for change is upon us, and it is our responsibility as a community to support these efforts and transitions.

In December 2017, GYB wrote an open letter to the President of the Canadian Actors' Equity Association (Equity), Scott Bellis, addressing Equity's lack of presence at a groundbreaking meeting of industry partners in Canada. That meeting gathered stakeholders in the Canadian entertainment industry and included unions representing directors, performers, producers, and media workers. The result of that meeting was the creation of a code of conduct that could be applied industry-wide. This was a pivotal meeting for our industry, yet the president of the association was not present. After this letter expressing disappointment in the lack of leadership shown by the major association representing stage artists, a group of artists who had become a part of the GYB network was invited to attend a meeting at the Equity office in Toronto. In the meeting, we discussed concerns about bylaws, respectful workplaces, and the Equity initiative Not in OUR Space! There were so many GYB supporters in attendance that additional stacks of chairs had to be brought in. These supporters were demanding change from the artists' association. It is important to note that

not all in attendance were members of Equity: some were members of the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA), others members of neither. What became clear was that whether or not one is a part of an official organization, association, or alliance, we are one community. It is our responsibility to take care of each other. Every artist that interacts and works within the Canadian entertainment industry has equal rights and value and should be treated as such, regardless of association, qualification, age, gender, class, or background.

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The Got Your Back Canada core team at a meeting in the Why Not Theatre office in Toronto, Ontario, on International Women's Day, 2018. From left to right: Marcia Johnson, Maev Beaty, Jennifer Wigmore, Thalia Gonzalez Kane, Ruby Joy, Briony Glassco, and Martha Burns. Photo courtesy of Thalia Gonzalez Kane

That initial meeting was the beginning of many exchanges with Equity, discussing bylaws, respectful workplaces, and reporting policies. GYB formed a working group to tackle these issues. The team spent countless hours reviewing Equity documents and learning about how the association worked in order to offer suggestions that could improve the experiences of fellow artists when working under Equity contracts. Artists became empowered when they learned and understood the ways in which our association runs. We began to recognize the importance of educating ourselves on our governing bodies so we could take ownership of our careers.

Soon after the formation of the Equity-focus working group, we formed another working group, focused on arts board governance. The aim of this group was to educate artists on governance, on how arts boards worked, and to attain artist representation on theatre boards. This group created an open letter<sup>1</sup> that was sent to theatres across Canada seeking a new artistic director. These theatres included Soulpepper Theatre in Toronto and the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre in Winnipeg. The letter offered suggestions and direction to ensure boards were giving equal opportunity to candidates and vigorously seeking the best candidate for the position. A focus was put on succession planning, inclusivity, and transparency from theatre boards regarding how they selected candidates and why.

In the winter of 2018, GYB formed a leadership group. Its goal was to address the need to move multicultural, generational, emerging, and mid-level artists into leadership positions. Succession planning is vital for the future growth of our industry and has been overlooked in the past. It is our duty to ensure that the skills and values necessary to lead this industry are taught and made accessible to those who have an interest in filling the leadership positions our theatres need. We have a plethora of talent and untapped potential in this country. Investing in emerging and mid-level artists is a powerful and emboldening act, which will make our future artists and potential for theatrical innovation boundless. To do this, we have been connecting early-career artists with established artists to offer advice and share the experiences they've had. We have gathered artists who have similar aspirations and asked how we could support their realization. Leadership has been a primary focus in this. We have had women who have held artistic leadership positions in the country share their methodology and offer insight regarding how to prepare and equip oneself for a position of theatre leadership when the opportunity presents. While we are still in the early stages, we've found the act of gathering, listening, and troubleshooting what stands in the way of artists accomplishing their goals to be empowering and a step of hope for the first time in a long while.

GYB has been working on collecting best-practice stories about positive rehearsal, audition, conflict resolution, and show-run experiences over the past year. These are stories and examples from rehearsals, auditions, interviews, and any other experiences related to the industry that have been handled in a positive way. If someone has only ever learned negative habits, how are they to know there is an alternative? Our goal is to have a collection available to all artists as a point of reference. More resources offer us education, perspective, and advantage. We are still in the process of collecting stories and aim to publish an archive of these on

our website. The more we can collect and share these, the more strengthened our industry can become.

In 2018, we began collecting Codes of Conduct and Harassment Policies. GYB core members reached out to theatres across the country asking if the theatres would voluntarily send us their codes of conduct and harassment policies to post publicly on our website. We now have a collection of over a dozen documents from theatres, training institutions, and associations published on our website for anyone to access easily and efficiently. We have compiled a document of post-secondary training institutions with all the harassment policies for younger artists who are still in training so they too can educate themselves and understand the power they have. Our hope is to encourage proactive engagement and transparency in our industry from the very beginning of artists' careers.

One of GYB's primary initiatives in 2019 was an Acting Educators Conference in May 2019, the product of GYB's actor training working group. This conference was an opportunity for artists who teach to get together and exchange skills, tools, and resources in order to provide optimal education for those who've yet to enter the industry. Theatre schools have been identified as a problem for quite some time, and, more recently, these problems have come to the forefront.<sup>2</sup> If artists aren't shown a healthy environment in their training institutions, how can they be expected to know what transpires in the professional world? How can they know the standard and protocol they deserve to expect without being shown best practices from the beginning? These institutions are often the building blocks of the beginning of young artists' careers and an opportune time to empower them. The two-day conference for acting educators was a successful opportunity to share skills among artists who teach in order to offer stronger and more inclusive educational experiences for young theatre students before they have entered the industry.

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GYB's actor training working group—comprising former students, recent grads, and students who were cut from programs, as well as current and former educators—also contributed thoughts and resources for the creation of a national survey to gather information about the state of acting training in Canada. The survey was made for students, current and former, as well as educators. The survey results were shared at the May 2019 conference and were used to encourage discussion around what the pressing issues are and working out how to improve the quality of training. Following the conference, we plan to share these results publicly on our website to open discussion nationally regarding the state of acting training and the areas where improvement is needed. This conference is our first step toward improving training organizations across the country and upholding an expected standard. It

is our responsibility as a community to share our experiences and offer support to the new generation to ensure a fruitful future for our industry and every member of it.

The past two years have brought major changes in policy and leadership. It's been both an exciting and an unnerving time. While the emerging changes have been long overdue, it has been a trying time that has unsettled the industry as we knew it. The bravery of the artists who've come forward and led the charges must be acknowledged. None of this has been easy. A goal of ours in all of this has been to provide support for those who seek it and to encourage this powerful movement to continue.

As with any grassroots initiative, we encountered challenges. The initial growth was both exciting and overwhelming. We didn't entirely know what we were in the beginning. We knew we wanted to connect artists but weren't sure how it would manifest beyond informal gatherings. Over time, we've been able to define what this group is, with the understanding that it is a living community and that it changes according to needs. At its core, it is a space to foster connection and comfort.

The growth of this group has involved a lot of learning along the way. There have certainly been cases in which we have been approached by an artist with an issue that left us unsure about how best to move forward and be of assistance. In these cases, we did our research. We reached out and educated ourselves on whatever we needed to acquire a greater depth of understanding. We sought out those who have the knowledge we need and collaborated. This practice has continued to expand our community. We are all learning how to navigate these times together.

Many of the people who work within GYB are artists. We have families, jobs, auditions, and other commitments. Forming this group and keeping it active regularly took strategic thinking and organization. Our lives, like those of many artists, are unpredictable. It was necessary to proceed with a certain degree of flexibility and recognition of the level of commitment needed to keep GYB an effective and reliable support group. We have now established a core group that continues to adapt and expand based on the availability of the team and the needs of each member. Members of this core group lead different initiatives at particular times. The group meets regularly and discusses concerns that arise and new ventures to pursue. We plan gatherings and ways we can improve what we do with an emphasis on connecting with a greater variety of artists and gaining more perspective on the landscape that is the Canadian theatre community. Folks who have contributed to the core team thus far include Maev Beaty, Mikaela Davies, Chantal Forde, Briony Glassco, Chala Hunter, Cynthia Jimenez-Hicks, Marcia Johnson, Ruby Joy, Kristina Nicoll, Kimwun Pehinec, Sarah Robbins, and Jennifer Wigmore. We look forward to this group continuing to fluctuate and grow in order to understand a wider range of opinions and experiences from the artists in the entertainment industry.

Over the past two years, GYB grew from eleven people in a living room in Toronto to a national network of artists. The rapidity with which the group has grown is proof of the necessity of a network like this. It's an indication of a void that we hope we've contributed to filling positively, and we're encouraged to promote further growth and hear new voices that have not been listened to in the past. The ideal future in our eyes is one in which the community feels strong and diverse and demonstrates inclusion and understanding. At the end of the day, we are stronger and more powerful together. GYB will continue making safe spaces wherever we can, as best as we can. Getting together is a creative act, and our goal is to blossom with that creativity on- and offstage. We must continue to share the power and, in turn, share the freedom to speak and work in a fruitful environment that emphasizes taking risks. We want to feel empowered to take risks and speak our minds and allow every voice to be heard, knowing our community will keep us safe and supported while doing so.

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## Notes

- 1 The letter addressing theatre boards can be found on the Got Your Back Canada website under the page "Current Initiatives," subheading "Arts Boards Governance."
- 2 In February 2017, an article published by *Intermission Magazine*, "Confessions from Theatre School," written by Megan Robinson, sparked controversy and raised questions about the ethics of training in theatre school, giving way to multiple former students coming forward with their stories.

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## Works Cited

- Got Your Back Canada. "Letter to Search Committees." *Got Your Back Canada-Current Initiatives*, 7 May 2019. [gotyourbackcanada.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/Letter-to-Search-Committees.pdf](https://gotyourbackcanada.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/Letter-to-Search-Committees.pdf)
- Robinson, Megan. "Confessions from Theatre School." *Intermission Magazine*, 17 February 2017. [intermissionmagazine.ca/artist-perspective/confessions-theatre-school/](https://intermissionmagazine.ca/artist-perspective/confessions-theatre-school/)

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## About the Authors

Thalia Gonzalez Kane is an Ecuadorian-Canadian multidisciplinary artist. She has worked as a performer, playwright, director, designer, and producer in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. She is a co-founder of Got Your Back Canada, adviser to [de]centre—the queer creative network for Atlantic Canadians, and the Artistic Producer of Crave Productions. Marcia Johnson is an actor, playwright, dramaturge, librettist, and director of audiobooks. She is based in Toronto. She was in the 2018 Blyth Festival acting company in *The New Canadian Curling Club* and *1837: The Farmers Revolt*. Her play *Serving Elizabeth* will have its world premiere in 2020.