



MIXED
COMPANY
THEATRE

40+ years

Mixed Company Theatre's Community Resource Guide

IN THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

Summarizing the key strategies, ideas, and discussions shared by community members during the performances.

The play looked at challenges newcomer youth face when integrating to Canadian society.



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BACKGROUND

About this Document

This document is intended to serve as a resource for newcomer youth as they navigate the challenges of settling into life in Canada. It offers insights into racial, cultural and social issues including racial discrimination, gender bias, harassment, and unemployment, that many newcomer youth encounter in their daily lives.



The reflections and learnings shared here are drawn from interactive audience engagement that followed a performance of “In the Land of Milk and Honey”, a Forum Theatre play written by Heather Cherron von Atzigen and performed by newcomer youth participating in the YMCA’s Newcomer Youth Leadership Development (NYLD) program in 2025. The play presented challenging real-life situations faced by newcomer youth, and invited audience members to explore alternative actions and more inclusive responses that the youth could employ when encountering similar situations.

By sharing these stories and strategies, our goal is to support newcomer youth in feeling seen, understood, and empowered with alternative ways to respond to difficult situations. We hope this document serves as a useful tool not just for youth but also caregivers, youth workers, educators, and service providers to facilitate conversations with youth on these topics.

BACKGROUND

What is Forum Theatre?

Forum Theatre is an innovative, interactive theatrical approach first developed by Augusto Boal in the 1970s. It involves communities in developing real-time strategies to address social issues in creative and participatory ways. In an MCT production, a story representing a pressing issue is co-created with community members through workshops and improvisation. A Forum Theatre facilitator works with the community to develop their story into a play which is often performed by the community members themselves.

The scenes are presented in full and then reviewed a second time. During this second viewing, individual audience members are invited to intervene in the play and try out alternative actions. Guided by a Forum Theatre facilitator/s, these audience members (spect-actors) replace the actors on stage to explore new possibilities. This process helps create a sense of agency and builds capacity for social change.



BACKGROUND

How we developed “In the Land of Milk and Honey”



Mixed Company Theatre partnered with the YMCA to engage a group of 11 newcomer youth enrolled in the Newcomer Youth Leadership Development (NYLD) program in a Forum Theatre process. The youth group met once a week over a period of three months, participating in theatre games and exercises focused on creative expression, storytelling, critical analysis, and collaborative development of a play centering their lived experiences as newcomers.

The weekly workshops offered a space for these youth to deepen connections with one another through the stories they shared. While each of their journeys to Canada was unique, they gradually bonded further with one another as they discovered the common experiences they shared of navigating cultural difference, systemic barriers, and the complexity of identity.

With the support of Heather Cherron von Atzigen (Facilitator and Playwright) and Swetha Ranganathan (Co-Facilitator), the youth developed scenes that reflected real-life challenges they face.

Heather scripted the 3 scenes and wove them together with the youths' poems and collaboratively created music to create the Forum Theatre play “In the Land of Milk and Honey”. The youth performed the play on March 15, 2025, at the Central YMCA to an active audience. This document shares key learnings from the dialogue that took place.



BACKGROUND

Synopsis

“In the Land of Milk and Honey” is an interactive performance by newcomer youth that explores what it means for them to navigate daily life in Toronto/Canada while grappling with questions of racial discrimination, employment barriers, and harassment on public transit.

Through poetry, original music, and scenes drawn from lived experiences, the performance reflects on moments that may seem ordinary—such as taking transit, attending a job interview, or shopping for groceries—but are shaped by racism, bias, and cultural misunderstanding.

Dumi, a newcomer youth, looks for a familiar ingredient in a grocery store but faces suspicion and stereotyping rooted in anti-Black racism. **Mingxu**, **Cornell**, and **John** go through job interviews where their interactions reflect how bias—based on language, race, gender, or familiarity—can shape perceptions of competence. On the subway, **Gabby**, **Feisty**, and **Lanie** experience harassment and intimidation, while bystanders respond with judgment or silence rather than support.

The performance is interwoven with poetry and song that reflect the youth’s memories, frustrations, and hopes. After the performance, audience members are invited to reflect, engage with the scenes, and try out alternative responses. Together, we explore what inclusion and care can look like in practice.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Racism at a Grocery Store

"What Can I Do for You?"

Dumi, a newcomer youth, enters a grocery store looking for efo, a leafy vegetable from home he needs to make a familiar, comforting soup. When he asks Cathay, a store employee, for help, she initially ignores him. When she finally responds, she doesn't recognize the word and treats Dumi's request as confusing or inappropriate, rather than making an effort to understand.

Another customer, Billy, interrupts and mocks Dumi's accent and food, reinforcing Cathay's dismissive attitude. As Dumi tries to clarify using a photo on his phone, the situation escalates. Cathay threatens to call security, and Billy implies Dumi might have a gun when he reaches into his pocket. Despite never raising his voice, Dumi is profiled and treated as a threat.

The audience made some suggestions to how the interaction between Dumi and Cathay could have taken place, likely to avoid the escalation that took place:

- ▶ The employee could respond with curiosity and a willingness to help, asking questions about the product and requesting a photo for clarification.
- ▶ If another customer interrupts, they could be politely informed that they will be helped after the current customer.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Racism at a Grocery Store

"What Can I Do for You?"

- ▶ The store manager could step in to facilitate the conversation in the moment and follow up later with the employee to address inappropriate behaviour.
- ▶ Dumi could check in with the employee with empathy, acknowledging they may be having a difficult day, which might shift the tone of the interaction.
- ▶ The manager could also check in with the employee's well-being more generally, providing support that might lead to more positive customer engagement.
- ▶ The bystander, Billy, could have respected Dumi's turn and avoided interfering.
- ▶ Billy could have reflected on how his assumptions and comments contributed to escalating the situation unnecessarily.



WHAT WE LEARNED

Racism at a Grocery Store

"What Can I Do for You?"

Facilitation Questions:

- ▶ *Have you witnessed or experienced situations like this in a grocery store or public place?*
- ▶ *What would you do as the Manager of this store to prevent situations like this?*
- ▶ *What else could Billy or another customer do when they witness Cathay's inappropriate behaviour?*
- ▶ *What could Dumi do differently to advocate for himself?*
- ▶ *Why is it difficult to step in at times like this, and how can we practice being helpful bystanders?*
- ▶ *How can youth better advocate for themselves when dealing with cultural bias or discrimination?*





WHAT WE LEARNED

Job Interview Challenges

"Too Sensitive"

Job Interview - Mingxu

Mingxu has moved to Canada 3 months ago from China. She is an experienced candidate for the job role of a cashier. But when she goes to the interview, her name is repeatedly mispronounced, and she is questioned about her background and English proficiency. The interviewer, Yusra, asks inappropriate questions about her religion and country of origin, then dismisses her qualifications as "foreign". Despite Mingxu's patience and clarity, her skills are overlooked.

The audience acknowledged that job seekers may sometimes feel they have no choice but to stay in a discriminatory situation out of economic necessity. They also recognized the courage it takes to walk away from such environments.

Suggestions for Mingxu included:

- ▶ Politely correcting the pronunciation of her name and reinforcing that it matters. She could also ask the interviewer's name in return, helping to shift the tone of the conversation.
- ▶ Focusing on transferable skills and experiences from previous roles, regardless of where those roles were located.
- ▶ Highlighting strengths such as being approachable, confident, and a strong communicator to demonstrate her fit for the role.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Job Interview Challenges

"Too Sensitive"

If other job options were available to her, audience members suggested she could:

- ▶ Walk away or decline the role if the work environment feels disrespectful.
- ▶ Report the interviewer to a manager or human resources department.

Facilitation Questions - Mingxu:

- ▶ *Have you heard about or experienced inappropriate questions at an interview? What are some questions that are illegal and/or inappropriate to come up during an interview?*
- ▶ *What are some concerns Mingxu might face at a workplace like this?*
- ▶ *If she has no other job options, how can she advocate for herself at this workplace to ensure she is treated with the respect she deserves?*



WHAT WE LEARNED

Job Interview Challenges

"Too Sensitive"

Job Interview - Cornell

Cornell, another candidate for the same role, is met with flirtatious remarks and assumptions based on his appearance. Yusra makes inappropriate comments about his race and presumed lifestyle, implying that someone with a strong build like him should consider manual labour rather than professional aspirations like banking. When Cornell expresses his goals respectfully, he is labelled "too sensitive."

Audience suggestions included:

- ▶ Cornell could ask respectful questions about the organization's workplace culture and expectations, to assess whether the environment is professional and aligned with his values.
- ▶ Employers should invest in training interviewers to ensure equitable and respectful hiring practices, especially when interviewing diverse candidates.

Facilitation Questions - Cornell:

- ▶ *Let's reflect: Have we assumed people's professions or skills based on their race? What are some instances when we may have done so?*
- ▶ *What could be some consequences of harboring such stereotypes about people?*
- ▶ *What are some ways we could respond during an interview when someone makes comments about our race or culture that may be unwelcome?*

WHAT WE LEARNED

Harassment on Public Transit

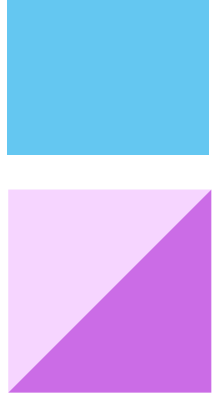
"In Transit" - Part I

On a late-night subway ride, three friends—Gabby, Feisty, and Lanie—are heading home after a party. Dressed joyfully and full of energy, they board the train chatting and laughing. Their chatter is disrupted by Ethel, an older passenger. She pokes Feisty with her cane and scolds the group for their outfits, implying they are inappropriate and shameful. She questions their values and how they were raised or parented, projecting judgment rather than concern. The friends try to ignore her, but the discomfort lingers.

Audience members had varying viewpoints on how one could respectfully respond to a senior who demonstrated inappropriate behaviour like touching someone with their cane. Here are ideas that came forward:



- ▶ Feisty could stand up for themselves and let Ethel know she cannot touch someone without consent. Being a senior, Ethel may think this as disrespectful “talk back” from youth, but her behaviour will have been addressed and reinforce the power of advocating for oneself.
- ▶ Lanie could step in as an ally, setting a boundary on behalf of Feisty and reinforcing the importance of consent.



WHAT WE LEARNED

Harassment on Public Transit

"In Transit" - Part 2

As the friends brush off Ethel's comments, two male passengers, Bolgin and Dan, begin to harass them. Dan goads Bolgin by falsely claiming Gabby called him "stupid". When the youth push back and assert boundaries, the situation escalates. Feisty steps in to protect their friends but is mocked for their name and identity. When Gabby threatens to press the emergency button, other passengers react with frustration, blaming the group instead of confronting the harassment.

Audience insights included:

- ▶ Bolgin could think critically about Dan's attempt to escalate the situation and choose not to act on peer pressure. Setting boundaries with friends can prevent harm.
- ▶ Bystanders speaking up against harassment and affirming the youth's right to feel safe could empower Gabby and help de-escalate the situation.

Facilitation Questions:

- ▶ *Have you witnessed or experienced situations like this on public transit or other public space?*
- ▶ *What would you have said or done as one of the bystanders to help de-escalate the situation? When would you step in and why?*
- ▶ *Do you find public transit to be safe? Why or why not? How do we help it become a safer space for commuters?*

RESOURCES FOR YOUTH

Mental Health Support

Kids Help Phone

1-800-668-6868
kidshelpphone.ca

Lumenus Community Services (Toronto)

lumenus.ca

Youthline

youthline.ca

Employment Support

YMCA Youth Employment Services

ymcagta.org

YES – Youth Employment Services

yes.on.ca

For Youth Initiative

foryouth.ca

Gender-Based Violence

CLEO – Sexual Harassment & Abuse Law Info

stepstojustice.ca

Assaulted Women's Helpline:

1-866-863-0511
TTY: 1-866-863-7868
awhl.org

Draw-the-Line

draw-the-line.ca

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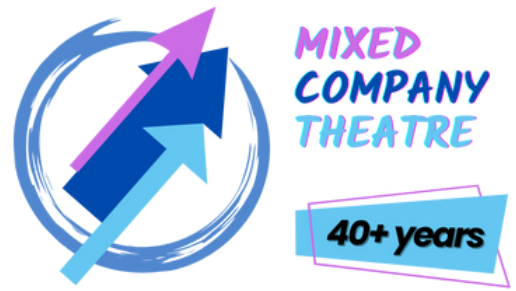
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