PETER HINTON-DAVIS

ORDER OF CANADA

STAGE DIRECTOR | PLAYWRIGHT | EDUCATOR

Hinton-Davis, Peter (b. Kingston, Ontario, 23 July 1962). Canadian theatre and opera director, dramaturg, and playwright. Through his commitment to new play development, Indigenous theatre, and revisionist productions of canonical works, Peter Hinton-Davis has significantly impacted the evolution of contemporary Canadian theatre. His exhaustively researched stagings are at once visually stunning and intellectually engaged, firmly rooted in the social, cultural, and political context in which they are created.

A graduate of Toronto Metropolitan University, Hinton-Davis began his career as an actor but quickly found his passion in directing. He gained attention early in his career for an unflinching production of Michi's Blood, an avant-garde work by the German playwright Franz Xaver Kroetz that depicts domestic violence and abortion (Crow's Theatre, Toronto, 1982). This was followed by successive positions in new play development at Theatre Passe Muraille (Toronto), Canadian Stage (Toronto), and Playwrights Theatre Centre (Vancouver). He then served as the dramaturg-in-residence at Playwrights' Workshop Montréal and as an artistic associate at the Stratford Festival. This period saw him develop and direct a number of now canonical Canadian plays, including John Mighton's Possible Worlds (1990) and Marie Clements's Burning Vision (2003). Hinton-Davis has also penned six original plays, including The Swanne trilogy (2002–4), and written libretti for two operas by Peter Hannan.

In 2005, Hinton-Davis took over as the AD of English theatre at Ottawa's NAC, shaping how Canada conceptualises its national theatre. Among Hinton-Davis's innovations were reinstating the English-language acting company in 2009 and programming the company's first season of all Canadian plays (2006/07). The former brought together a diverse group of artists from across Canada; the latter represented an important move towards emancipating Canadian theatre from its enduring colonial ties to English and American drama and created space for Indigenous programming. Hinton-Davis's commitment to Indigenous theatre is evident in his selection of (among others) Marie Clements (Métis/Dene), Kevin Loring (Nlaka'pamux), Daniel David Moses (Six Nations), and Yvette Nolan (Algonquin) as playwrights-in- residence. Hinton-Davis co-produced an Indigenous adaptation of Julius Caesar, Death of a Chief, directed by Nolan and Kennedy C. MacKinnon, and his own adaptation of King Lear, cast exclusively with Indigenous actors. In 2008, he partnered on the first ever collaboration between the NAC and the RSC, a stage adaptation of Margaret Atwood's Penelopiad.

Hinton-Davis's departure from the NAC in 2012 was born of a desire for further artistic growth through freelance directing. His love of language, extensive pre-production research, and sumptuous aesthetic – marked by evocative stage tableaux and vibrant imagery – were welcomed at the Shaw Festival. Hinton-Davis gained significant praise for his visually compelling staging of Lady Windermere's Fan (Shaw Festival, 2013). The production drew heavily on impressionist painting and contemporary music to offer an engaged, feminist celebration of Lady Windermere's resilience. Hinton-Davis's subsequent staging of Pygmalion (Shaw Festival, 2015) used bold visuals to transpose Shaw's classic to present-day London, where Higgins, a bearded hipster devoted to startups, navigates an emerging class structure defined by cultural and social capital. Known for a process that privileges building trust with performers and encouraging them to take risks, Hinton-Davis returned to the festival in 2018 to re-envision Joan Littlewood's iconic Oh! What a Lovely War, moving the setting to Niagara on the Lake during the Great War. This shift emphasised the racially driven struggles faced by Indigenous Peoples and Black Canadians during the period. Hinton-Davis continued to develop his feminist aesthetic at Shaw in 2023 with the world premiere of Edith Wharton's lost play Shadow of a Doubt. Working in collaboration with the video artist HAUI™, Hinton-Davis used live close-up projections of characters' faces to chart their emotional journeys, highlighting the working class heroine's uneasy quest for agency as she negotiates marriage into the upper class.

Beyond his work at Shaw, Hinton-Davis has collaborated with theatre companies across Canada to stage plays exploring the intersections of race and 2SLGBTQIA+ identities as well as feminist narratives. He brought the world premiere of Mae West's Sex to the Shaw Festival in 2019. Though the play is set in 1926, Hinton-Davis's vivid interpretation and innovative casting worked across time by challenging gender binaries and emphasizing feminist resistance. In 2022, Hinton-Davis partnered with Walter Borden, a queer, black Canadian theatre icon, to reshape and update Borden's forty-year-old solo show. Featuring historical performance footage and set in a parking attendant's booth that doubled as a time machine, The Last Epistle of Tightrope Time (NAC and Nepture Theatre) homed in on Borden's experience as a gay black man in a predominantly white society. In 2023, Hinton-Davis vibrantly realized another salient examination of race, sexuality and oppressionwith world premiere of The Hooves Belonged to the Deer by Lebanese-Canadian playwright Makram Ayache (Tarragon Theatre in association with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre). For Ayache's story of a closeted Muslim teenager growing up in rural Alberta, Hinton-Davis fashioned a highly physical score and set the action amidst a dreamscape where the central action and a creation myth grounded in Abrahamic traditions played out on a sea of elemental red sand.

Thanks to his signature visual productions, Hinton-Davis is also a sought-after opera director. Important opera stagings include Riel, a 1967 opera about the Métis leader with music by Harry Somers and libretto by Mavor Moore. Hinton-Davis's direction of Riel (COC, 2017) sought to free the piece from its colonial bearings, chiefly a preoccupation with the conflict between Canada's English and French colonisers. His production focused on land theft and other injustices inflicted on First Peoples through his addition of new Indigenous characters, including a silent chorus of Indigenous witnesses and the incorporation of Michif (the Métis language) and Cree dialogue. In 2017, Hinton-Davis brought his signature visuals to Missing, a chamber opera by Brian Current (music) and Marie Clements (libretto) dedicated to British Columbia's missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Among Hinton-Davis's other celebrated opera stagings are the world premiere of Hadrian (COC, 2018) with music by Rufus Wainwright and libretto by Daniel McIvor, and a radically abridged adaptation of Richard Wagner's Das Rheingold by Jonathan Dove and Graham Vick (Edmonton Opera, 2024). Through lavish visuals and a blazing portrayal of love-making, Hinton's production of Hadrian actualized the true story of a first century Roman emperor in enduring love with a young Greek man. Hinton-Davis's compact Das Rheingold saw Wagner's epic transposed to a spare, hotel room set, keenly focusing on family and relationships in a rare and intimate re-envisioning of Wagner's otherwise grandiose opera.

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