THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Toronto culture feted at annual Mayor's Arts Lunch

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL
PUBLISHED MAY 18, 2017



Mayor John Tory speaks at the Globe and Mail Small Business Summit in Toronto on May 9, 2017.
JENNIFER ROBERTS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Canadian history, as taught in school, seemed to be mostly about white people, especially white men, said Anique Jordan, who won a $10,000 prize for an emerging artist on Wednesday at Toronto's annual Mayor's Arts Lunch. But growing up in Toronto after her family moved to Canada from Trinidad, Jordan gradually discovered something disturbing about how Indigenous people and black people fit into the prevailing idea of what Canada is.

"Our identities are used to create the broad story of how multicultural Canada is," she said at the event, held at the Arcadian Court at Bay and Queen, "and we're used as tools." As a result, what gets left out of the official version is that a lot of violence was done to black people and Indigenous people. Her work, she said, is about removing the illusion and exposing the facts about what happened.

"Arts and culture are integral to the soul and success of Toronto," Mayor John Tory said. He added that the money the city provides to the Toronto Arts Council – its $18,079,500 grant budget works out to $7.23 per capita - is "one of the best investments we make." He also said that the arts are important to every aspect of city life, including social justice.

In a joint statement, Claire Hopkinson, the CEO of the Toronto Arts Foundation, and Kathleen Sharpe, the foundation's board chair, hailed the event – attended by 350 people – as an opportunity to honour the achievements of those whose creativity has made Toronto a better place. "We are here to celebrate what an amazing city of arts we live in," they said.

The richest prize of the event, the $20,000 Arts for Youth Award, went to the Artists Mentoring Youth Project. Its mission is to break down barriers for, among others, young women, gender non-binary youth and youth of colour to create short performance pieces about their experiences, then go on to turn them into longer works.

The Margo Bindhardt and Rita Davies Cultural Leadership Award went to Jacoba Knaapen, whose family moved to Canada from the Netherlands. A formative experience, she said, was seeing a production of a Canadian play by David French when she was in Grade 8. (Knaapen is the executive director of the Toronto Alliance for the Performing Arts.) Meanwhile, the Muriel Sherrin Award for international achievement in dance went to Yvonne Ng.

The Toronto Arts and Business Award went to Aviv restaurant, which specializes in Mediterranean cuisine and has a close relationship with the Tarragon Theatre.