



QUEER ARTS FESTIVAL

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dispersed

it's not easy being green

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SD Holman

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Piano Burning Postponed, From the Artistic Director

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Anyone who programs Annea Lockwood's conceptual art classic *Piano Burning* knows that controversy is part of the package. Conceptual art challenges us to engage with ideas through provocation or absurdity, even if we don't personally witness the work.

Right on cue, publicity for QAF's revisioning of *Piano Burning* at Mountain View Cemetery ignited our comments sections with curious questions and outraged condemnation.

I ask you to pause instead, to contemplate fire in all its elemental beauty and terror, and to reflect upon what we burn and why, who gets to burn, and who decides.

Why is *Piano Burning* in a cemetery?

- Burning plays a central role in many Indigenous cultures, including our host nations of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh. Honoured Two-Spirit elder Sempúlyan wanted to speak at *Piano Burning* about the spiritual role of fire to communicate with the ancestors; items placed in the fire are sent as offerings to the dead now in the Spirit world. It makes sense: in fire, we directly witness the transformation of matter into energy, much as we transform from matter to energy at death. Cultures the world over employ burning in funerary and mourning rites, including incense, candles, and bonfires.
- Canada banned Indigenous use of fire for a century, severing this grounding spiritual relationship as part of Canada's campaign of cultural genocide.
- Once Canada lifted the fire ban, Two-Spirit people still experienced barriers to full participation in ceremony despite the place of honour they traditionally held, as colonial gender binaries enforced through Residential "School" torture exerted their traumatic hold. This is why the MMIWG Report specifically called for safe and dedicated ceremony and cultural places and spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ [Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex and asexual] youth and adults, and to advocate for 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion in all cultural spaces.
- Even today, Canada periodically bans Indigenous ceremonies, citing public health or safety, indifferent to the deep psychological and spiritual wounds this causes.
- In a public declaration of reclamation and empowerment, *Piano Burning* centres Two-Spirit Artists: Sempúlyan (above); Russell Wallace, who composed a new piece for the occasion; designer Evan Ducharme who created a fire-proof ball gown; and Squamish Nation councillor Orene Askew (aka DJ O Show) who asked to light the blaze. Margo Kane and Full Circle First Nations Performance grounded the curation with cultural knowledge.

Forest fires are raging across the province; isn't it irresponsible and dangerous to perform *Piano Burning* now?

- I hoped you'd ask this question. Ever wondered why we are having so many forest fires? Global warming is only part of the picture.
- The colonial fire ban also outlawed the time-tested Indigenous forestry practice of controlled burns. Canadian forestry policy paternalistically discounted Indigenous knowledge, assuming that Europeans automatically knew better.
- Western science finally caught up with Indigenous knowledge. It now recognizes the wisdom of controlled burns "[specifically designed to remove sources of fire fuel loads, or cultural burns which are sacred Indigenous practices performed for a host of reasons including ecological stewardship, rejjgging the soil for new vegetation, or creating new grazing paths for animals.](#)"
- Sadly, this recognition comes too late. After a century of colonial mismanagement, the underbrush is dense with kindling and dry as tinder. Fires, once started, rage uncontrollably.

Why burn a beautiful, valuable piano? What's next, a book burning? (Yes, that was asked)

- Yes, pianos are intricate, magical machines, arguably the peak achievement of European industrialization. And Europeans traditionally burn in effigy, as a gesture of violent contempt. Conversely, this collaborative revisioning of *Piano Burning* invites settlers to witness Indigenous ways of knowing in which we burn not what we despise, but what we cherish.
- I commissioned composer Russell Wallace to create a new piece for Rachel Kiyō Iwaasa to play on the piano for as long as it is safe. It grew out of hours of conversation between the two artists, sharing their family histories, their Lil'wat, Japanese, and shared Scandinavian traditions (Norwegian and Danish, respectively). The piece is dedicated to their ancestors, a musical offering that burns bright.
- Russell called his piece *A Clean Start*, named after Rachel (which means Innocent, like a lamb) Kiyō (清田 Pure, like clear running water). The name speaks to hope. Hope for a life washed clean of intergenerational trauma. Hope for a post-pandemic restart that has learned its lessons (that Black Lives Matter, that we are interconnected, that what happens to the most vulnerable affects everyone). Hope that as the number of unmarked graves exposed at former Residential Schools grows and grows, Canadians will learn to reconcile the difference between what we were taught and the history we can no longer deny. Hope for a way forward in shared respect, reciprocity, and responsibility.
- Not only the piano, but the pianist is also beautiful and valuable. We chose the players and the roles for this performance by asking, who should get to light a fire, and who should take the risk?
- Time permitting, Rachel will also play *Fornax Chemica* by composer Jeffrey Ryan. The title references the alchemical crucible in which fire magically transforms lead into gold, or base materials into the philosopher's stone.
- Annea's 1968 conception of *Piano Burning* asks us to confront our terror of change and loss. Fire is destructive, but it is also purifying, transformative, catalytic, life-sustaining, alluring, HAWT. We live in a time of dizzying, profound change. There is so much panic. *Piano Burning* allows us to face what we instinctively fear, stare down the impermanence of all things, and gaze into the inferno's potential for beauty and renewal.

QAF's 2021 theme is *It's Not Easy Being Green...* Isn't burning a piano harmful to the environment?

- Yes. And...
- The harm we do by burning one piano is infinitesimally small in the context of the capitalist growth economy.
- Much of the discourse on the environment focuses on individual consumer choice. Yet a mere [100 corporations are responsible for over 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions](#), and that doesn't even count the rest of the corporations. Consumer choices alone are insufficient and unequally distributed; policy and direct action are indispensable to slow environmental collapse.
- Outrage is the appropriate reaction to climate change; how we focus our outrage matters. If you were ready to rake us over the coals for a one-time piano burning, what are you doing to stop those whose climate footprint is massive and ongoing?
- Artful provocations like *Piano Burning* invite us to take a hard look at what we ourselves are doing, or not doing, and how we might do better.

But seriously, there's a provincial fire ban on. You're not really going to burn a piano now?!?

- No, we're not.
- We have a fire permit, but we will comply with the fire ban, and postpone *Piano Burning* until the authorities permit.
- Please remember, the authorities not only permitted but actively abetted and incited everything that brought us to this latest fire ban, to a world on fire, to the precipice of climate catastrophe.
- Given everything that has led us to this moment, whose authority should we listen to? Who should get to decide? And who should pay the price?
- With this in mind, we invite you to *Piano Burning* at a date to be confirmed in the fall of 2021. Meet you at the cemetery!

— SD Holman
Artistic & Executive Director, Queer Arts Festival
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For media & interview requests, please contact:
Tanya Commisso, Communications Coordinator | tanya@queerartsfestival.com | 604-992-8619