

PLAY TELLS STORY OF ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

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By [Wayne Grady](#), [Kingston Whig-Standard](#), 22 December 2014

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A few weeks ago I saw Nameless, a mesmerizing one-act play performed at the Rotunda Theatre, on the Queen's University campus. Written by Devon Jackson, a fourth-year student at Queen's, it is a recounting, in some cases a re-enactment, of the atrocities committed by the Ottoman Turks against the Armenians 100 years ago. Nearly 1.5 million Armenians were exterminated between 1915 and the end of the First World War, a carefully planned and executed massacre that, in 1943, inspired Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin to coin the word "genocide" to describe what had happened.

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Jackson wrote the play, he says, because he hadn't heard of the Armenian Genocide until he stumbled upon the music of Zulal, a group of Armenian singers, and began reading about their background.

"Something in the women's songs touched me," he says, "and through writing I realized that the stories of the Armenian Genocide were human stories, part of our collective history as human beings."

Few of Jackson's contemporaries at Queen's knew of the genocide, either, despite the fact that there are more than 50,000 Armenians living in Canada, most of them in Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa. Some of Canada's best-known cultural figures have been Armenian: the children's singer Raffi; the photographer Yousef Karsh; filmmaker Atom Egoyan. Theatre critic and poet Keith Garebian, who has a PhD from Queen's and whose father was Armenian, grew up not speaking Armenian and knowing little about his family's history.

"I was exogenous to Armenia," he writes in his memoir, *Pain: Journeys Around my Parents*, "having

grown up ignorant of my father's origins and language."

In *Nameless*, stories of the genocide are told partly through the experiences of the four characters — like Zulal, all women, since few men survived the genocide — and partly through a kind of nonfiction narration of the massacre as an historical event. Tolstoy employs the same interplay of fiction and history in *War and Peace*; so does John Steinbeck in *Grapes of Wrath*. Jackson is in good company.

Our apparent mass amnesia of history is dangerous, symptomatic of what Quebec novelist Louis Hamelin calls our obsession with the present at the expense of the past. In his new book, *Fabrications*, Hamelin worries that the October Crisis of 1970 will fall victim to the current trend towards forgetting or even revising history. The October Crisis, he writes, "exists outside of the moment, and is therefore threatened by our mania for presentism and the conventional treatment of history that reduces significant events to a simple compilation of actors and dates."

Jackson, who for a time was taking a double major in drama and history, says that it was the conventional treatment of history that made him focus more specifically on drama.

"Whenever I sat in a history class to be lectured at about the dates and details of various battles, I'd find myself wondering what the people in those battles had been doing three minutes before. I wanted to know their stories."

As Prime Minister Harper has recently pointed out, we're in the middle of a five-year period, 2012 to 2017, that spans several important historical events: the War of 1812, the beginning of the First World War (1914), the 200th anniversary of the birth of Sir John A. Macdonald (Jan. 11, 2015), and the 150th anniversary of Confederation (July 1, 2017). No mention of the Armenian Genocide. The danger of forgetting or denying historical events is that it opens the door to someone rewriting what actually happened to tell a different story. It's called revisionist history, and it feeds on our collective amnesia.

In their book about the current government's attempt to rewrite Canadian history, *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety*, Kingston writers Ian McKay and Jamie Swift suggest that the Harper government is actively downplaying Canada's reputation as a peacekeeping nation and rebranding Canada as a fiercely militarist force, no doubt to smooth the transition of the role of Canadian troops in places like Afghanistan. Two years ago, for example, the War of 1812 was depicted in government ads as a "seminal" moment in Canadian history, when Canadians repelled an "invasion" by American armed forces and "won" the war.

As McKay and Swift point out, the War of 1812 was not a watershed moment in Canadian history: there was no "Canada" in 1812; the war was between Britain and America, and some of it just happened to have been fought on British soil north of the Great Lakes. Other parts were fought on the Russian steppes. And neither side won.

We'll be seeing similarly air-brushed portraits of Sir John A. in 2015. Heritage Canada has pumped

millions of dollars into manufacturing an image of Macdonald and the First World War that will determine what many future Canadians will know about their own history.

Fortunately, in all the hoopla over Macdonald's bicentennial, an effort is being made to include other voices with longer memories: Metis and First Nations peoples, for example, who were shunted aside in order to ensure that the railroad, not unlike a certain oil pipeline, would snake its undisputed way to the West Coast. Last month, Metis artist David Garneau spoke at Queen's University's "Critical Reflections on Sir John A. Macdonald" symposium, and on Jan. 10, Kingston's Macdonald Commission has James Daschuk, author of *Clearing the Plains*, as part of a panel discussion about Sir John A. to be held in Kingston Frontenac Public Library's central branch.

Devon Jackson's play is part of a wider movement to ensure that our collective amnesia is corrected. Because when we forget history, we aren't merely condemned to relive it, we are condemned to relive someone else's version of it. Whether it's a genocide that took place in another country a hundred years ago, or a revolution that took place in Canada 45 years ago, we should all be concerned about any attempt to deny or re-write our past in order to make history appear to justify a government's own social or political agenda.

As Devon puts it, "It's one thing to know that something happened, but another to know what happened."

*Wayne Grady is a Kingston writer whose novel *Emancipation Day* has recently appeared in paperback.*

