

# canadianstage

A world premiere event by a Canadian cultural icon

## UNSAFE

### AN INVESTIGATION IN THE CENSORSHIP OF ART AND THE ART OF CENSORSHIP IN CANADA

Written + Created by

**SOOK-YIN LEE**

Directed by Sarah Garton Stanley

Performed by Sook-Yin Lee + Christo Graham

March 12-31, 2019

***I was demonized. Art isn't just a right.  
I should have kept my mouth shut.  
Everything is sensitive.***

Sook-Yin Lee is a trailblazer; a fearless actor, filmmaker, musician, artist, activist, radio and television broadcaster. In *Unsafe: An Investigation into the Censorship of Art and the Art of Censorship in Canada*, Lee has created a hybrid documentary-performance that unravels the anxieties and taboos that make some art acceptable and some art not, on stage March 12-31 at the Berkeley Street Theatre.

Throughout her prolific career, this former Much Music VJ, radio host of CBC's *Definitely Not the Opera*, and Canadian Screen Award winning actress, has seen various forms of censorship. Combining Lee's broadcasting and journalism skills with live storytelling, *Unsafe* explores censorship and creativity in historical contexts and where it exists today in the silencing, exclusion, and social media call-out culture. Developed in residence at Canadian Stage, *Unsafe* is a provocative and timely theatrical experiment that asks: when is censorship generative; when is it destructive; when is it necessary; and where does it exist today?

All around us we are being censored -- politically and socially. *Unsafe* delves into the tension between our desire for freedom of expression and our need to control, the personal costs and consequences of opening up difficult conversations, and the constant societal pressures to suppress, withhold, restrict and sanitize expression.

BRENDAN HEALY, Artistic Director

MONICA ESTEVES, Executive Director

ALEXANDRA BAILLIE & TONY BAYLIS, Board Co  
Chairs

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"We are grateful to have Sook-Yin Lee bring this important work into our season," says Brendan Healy, Canadian Stage Artistic Director. "I applaud Sook-Yin and the artists involved in *Unsafe* for diving so fearlessly in these waters. We live in a time of greater interpersonal awareness and expanded social consciousness. Our society is renegotiating the terms of what it deems to be 'acceptable', both in speech and in action. *Unsafe* is a potent investigation of how this is affecting the creative voice of our artists."

Adding to this documentary/meta-theatrical production are projected interviews with artists on silencing, exclusion, and censorship: 2018 Polaris Music Award winning classical trained opera tenor Jeremy Dutcher; Governor General Award-winning poet, playwright and professor George Elliott Clarke; stand-up comedian Chris Robinson; Anglican priest and social justice activist Maggie Helwig; Globe and Mail columnist Kate Taylor; poet Rupi Kaur; Canadian-Arab artist Laila Binbrek and others.

*Unsafe*, created and performed by Sook-Yin Lee is on stage at the Berkeley Street Theatre March 12-31. Performances run Tuesdays at 8 PM, Wednesdays at 1 and 8 PM, Thursdays at 8 PM, Fridays at 7 PM, Saturdays 2 and 8 PM, and Sundays at 2 PM.

## **MEDIA NIGHT: MARCH 14**

**To receive further information or for an interview request, please contact  
CATHY PAINE at 416-367-8243 ext. 250 [cpaine@canadianstage.com](mailto:cpaine@canadianstage.com)**

### **ABOUT CANADIAN STAGE**

Canadian Stage is one of the country's leading not-for-profit contemporary performing arts organizations. The company produces, presents, commissions, and collaborates with multiple partners on cross-disciplinary work with a focus on performance styles that integrate theatre, dance, film, visual arts and more. Sharing innovative and vibrant performance work from Canada and around the world, it stages performances at three Toronto venues: The Bluma Appel Theatre at Civic Theatres Toronto; The Berkeley Street Theatre; and the High Park Amphitheatre. In July 2018, award-winning theatre director Brendan Healy was appointed Artistic Director.

### **ABOUT SOOK-YIN LEE**

Sook-Yin Lee is a filmmaker, musician, actor, interdisciplinary artist, radio & TV broadcaster. The former Much Music VJ was host/producer of the personal storytelling program *DNTO* on CBC Radio One and creator of the podcast, *Sleepover*. Lee starred in John Cameron Mitchell's groundbreaking LGBTQ movie *Shortbus* which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. *Year of the Carnivore*, her feature film writer-director debut premiered at TIFF. Lee's live performance work includes *How Can I Forget?*, *On Display* and *Sphere of Banished Suffering*. She won the 2014 Canadian Screen Award for Best Performance by a Lead Dramatic Actress for her role as "Olivia Chow" in *Jack*. Her movie, *Octavio is Dead!* starring Sarah Gadon and Rosanna Arquette won Best Director and Best Picture Awards at the Downtown Los Angeles Film Festival 2018. She plays in the band Jooj.

**BRENDAN HEALY**, Artistic Director

**MONICA ESTEVES**, Executive Director

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## AN INTERVIEW WITH SOOK-YIN-LEE

Multimedia artist and broadcaster Sook-Yin Lee's *Unsafe* is a meta-theatrical documentary performance that investigates how censorship affects art-making in Canada. What makes some art acceptable and some art not? We asked Lee to discuss the piece, which was developed in residence here at Canadian Stage.

**The title of your project is *Unsafe*. How would you describe the core subject matter of your piece and how it relates to "being unsafe"?**

*Unsafe* is a documentary performance that combines my broadcasting and journalism skills with live storytelling in a theatre. It explores censorship and creativity in historical contexts and where it exists today in silencing, exclusion, and social media call-out culture in Canada. It delves into the tension between our desire for freedom and need to control. *Unsafe* is dangerous because it reveals the personal cost and consequences of opening up a difficult conversation. Is it possible to even begin without, in some way, censoring someone else? And will it help or further damage spaces for equity and understanding? *Unsafe* is an unfolding experiment. I pose many thorny questions and we'll see what the responses are!

**What, in your own opinion, makes this such a relevant and urgent topic today?**

Movements throughout history have been about the struggle for greater liberty for everybody, and yet we're constantly confronted by pressures to suppress, withhold, restrict and sanitize expression. Today, social media backlash and call-outs are common, which makes us even more inclined to hide how we really feel in order to be loved, appear more interesting, and less annoying.

**The piece is concerned with public discourse and large communication platforms, but it's also deeply personal. Working on *Unsafe*, have you discovered anything new in terms of what makes you feel unsafe?**

In creating *Unsafe*, I encountered many obstacles due to sensitivity around the censorship conversation. It was frustrating and often scary when the project teetered on the verge of collapse. In those tense moments, I could have thrown in the towel, or succumbed to pressure, but I decided to commit to a new strategy for me, which was to accept each obstacle as graciously as I could and work with it. Even when I was confronted by obstacles I thought were impossible to overcome, I pushed myself to remain present and figure out a way to problem-solve. Interestingly, I think the obstacles and their work-around helped improve *Unsafe*!

**You are mostly known as a radio/TV personality, activist-artist, filmmaker and journalist, but this is the first time you are appearing in your own "play" in the theatre. Can you speak a little bit about what made you choose this genre - a theatrical performance crossing over into a documentary/meta-theatrical form?**

I have appeared in my own theatrical productions before but they were narrative dance works, which are poetic and expressionistic compared to the reality-based direction of *Unsafe*. *Unsafe* deals primarily in non-fiction and is grounded in the broadcast interview form, which I consider to be one of my artistic practices. Originally, I was hired by playwright and filmmaker Zack Russell via Canadian Stage and former

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Artistic Director Matthew Jocelyn, to develop a work on art and censorship. Delving into the process, it became clear to me that the most direct, revealing, surprising, educational, entertaining, and dangerous response to this difficult proposal was to embrace an experimental documentary-performance approach.

**In many Western cultures, young people today grow up with much greater awareness around social and cultural transgressions than their parents, but also more shielded from experiences of pain or discomfort. Some argue that this leaves them ill-equipped to face the harsh realities of the modern world. Do you think this is a trend we are witnessing, or are we at the cusp of a larger evolution that will ultimately bring about positive change?**

To be a young person is a challenging experience, given how little power and respect youth are afforded. Socio-economic hardships can put them at further risk. Even those born into privilege and power with parents who protect them, do not escape life's suffering. In Western cultures, young ones are confronted by peanuts that can kill them, playgrounds covered in protective rubber (a safety precaution that ironically sends a fearful message), and a world mightily messed up by preceding generations. Many feel the responsibility to reserve all rights and reverse all wrongs. It is an extraordinary time to be alive, when extreme clashes of belief systems, coupled with advances in technology and online communication radically alter our world and how we relate to one another. The results are staggering, terrifying, beautiful, and full of transformative possibility.

***Unsafe* runs March 12-31 at our Berkeley Street Theatre.**