



**APRIL 22 - MAY 11, 2025**  
**WORLD PREMIERE**

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# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Welcome educators!

Theatre Calgary's 2024-2025 Play Guides are intended to support your students' experience at Theatre Calgary this season. We encourage you to use some or all of these materials to provide context for your students before, during, and after their visit to Theatre Calgary. While not mandatory for students to enjoy the production, opportunities to connect art to personal life can deepen understanding and appreciation.

With that in mind, each guide provides you and your students with a range of contextual material. You will find background information on the play and playwright; social, linguistic, and historical context; expectations for the theatre; activities for you to lead in the classroom; and reflection questions to guide discussions. You'll find activities that connect to current events, are interdisciplinary, can be tied into your curriculum, and can be facilitated for various lengths of time.

Pages marked with a ★ can be photocopied and distributed to students.

We hope that you and your students enjoy your experience at Theatre Calgary this year!

# ABOUT THE PLAY

## SUMMARY.

The play opens with a drag performance by Blackfoot drag performer, Lady Nahaa (a term that is an expression of shock at something dirty or raunchy in the Blackfoot language). We then meet the artist, Toni, at the home he shares with his best friend, Chrissy, and her 16-year-old nephew, Richie.

Protective of Richie, Chrissy insists that Toni change out of his performance clothes before Richie wakes up and discovers that his uncle is, not only gay, but a drag performer.

We learn that Toni is planning for a naming ceremony with a Blackfoot elder, Rosie Running Eagle, and Toni needs Chrissy's help to prepare a "tradish" feast for the event.

When Richie awakens, Chrissy shoves Toni into the pantry to hide. But Richie discovers Lady Nahaa's boots kicked off and insists Chrissy try them to prove they're hers. He reveals that perhaps he's not as young and innocent as Chrissy had hoped.

That afternoon, a man comes to the door, waking Toni from his afternoon nap. Joseph claims to be Toni's father coming to make amends, but as the conversation progresses, it becomes clear that Toni may not be who Joseph thinks he is.

Just as Toni is about to reveal Joseph's mistake, we learn that Joseph wants to share half of his Residential School settlement with his son. Impossible to resist, Toni accepts this man as his father just as Richie returns home from school. Toni sneaks Joseph out to avoid having to clarify the situation.

Chrissy confronts Richie about skipping school. He accuses Chrissy of hypocrisy, as she dropped out of school for being bullied. As it turns out, Richie, too, is being harassed at school because his friends learned that his mother is transgendered.

When Chrissy turns to Toni for support, he relinquishes any responsibility, saying that he understands what schools are like for "folks like us."

The next day, Toni greets Joseph again, but this time keeping up the act by donning Chrissy's clothes. Just as we learn the real reason Joseph has sought out a blood relative—to find a match for liver transplant—Richie and Chrissy arrive home.



Toni hides a visibly ill Joseph in the pantry as Richie and Chrissy enter shouting about Richie being expelled for fighting. Joseph's physical pain makes it impossible for him to stay hidden for long, and when Chrissy reveals him in the pantry, he falls unconscious to the floor.

With Joseph now resting on the couch, Richie is sent to his room. Toni attempts to explain to Chrissy who Joseph is when Joseph wakes up and sees his actual son, Christian—now Chrissy. Without giving him a chance to explain himself, Chrissy kicks him out, while Richie takes it all in from the shadows.

The apartment is now immaculate as Toni has stayed up all night trying to apologize to Chrissy by cooking and cleaning. Richie wakes up, confides in Toni what's really going on in school, then heads off to apologize to his school principal.

When Chrissy wakes up, she's giving Toni the silent treatment as he tries to justify his lying to Joseph about taking the money. Unforgiving, Chrissy tells Toni that after his naming ceremony, he has to move out.

Joseph is returning to the apartment, though, and they see out the window as Richie approaches him on the sidewalk, ignoring Chrissy's frantic shouts to get inside and stay away from him.

When Richie enters the apartment, he finally confronts Chrissy about how overprotective she is, demanding to hear why she's forbidding him from talking to his grandfather. She reveals the abuse that she and her sister, Richie's biological mom, endured at the hands of her alcoholic father. Richie is grateful to finally know the truth about his family's past and admits to inviting Joseph to join them for Toni's naming ceremony that night.

The final scene of the play brings us to the evening of the naming ceremony. Chrissy encounters Rosie Running Eagle in her own living room as we learn that they have known one another since childhood and about Chrissy's discomfort with Blackfoot traditions.

## STORY WHOOSH

is an interactive storytelling technique that enables any kind of plot to come alive, even without participants having prior knowledge.

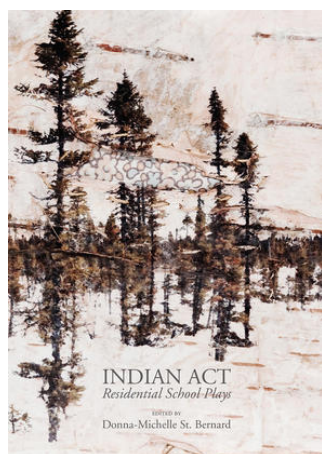
- The teacher facilitates the shared storytelling by bringing individuals and groups in and out of the action.
- As soon as characters, objects, places, or events in the story (i.e., servants, bad thoughts, ships, etc.) are mentioned, the first students step into the circle and make a shape or pose that represents what has been narrated.
- At any time the teacher can say "Whoosh!," and students quickly return to their 'places' in a circle.
- Continue the story around the group, so that different students get to play various characters and everyone gets a chance to try several roles, regardless of gender.

Rosie waxes philosophical about the past, present, and future—making the connection to Joseph Two Guns and the possibility of Chrissy being able to forgive him. She leaves them all to participate in the ceremony without her.

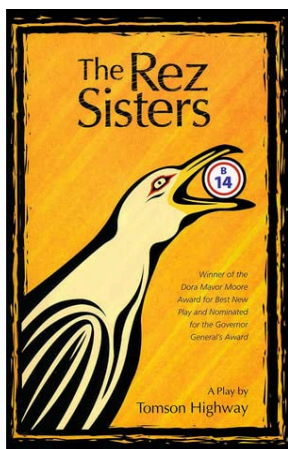
The ceremony begins after Joseph arrives and Toni appears in full Lady Nahaa drag. That is, until Chrissy storms back into the room to confront her father for a lifetime of ills and insists he leave her home.

After airing grievances, Chrissy and Joseph come to an understanding with Richie in mind, and the naming ceremony begins in earnest. In addition to Toni, Rosie is prepared to give names to Chrissy and Richie, as well. She yields to Joseph for help with this, calling on the names of his family. Toni then presents a letter of apology to Chrissy, and she allows him to stay. With amends made, the show concludes with traditional Blackfoot dances alongside a drag performance—merging the worlds of the characters.

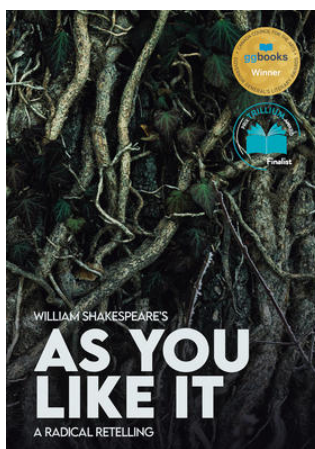
## INDIGENOUS CANADIAN PLAYS



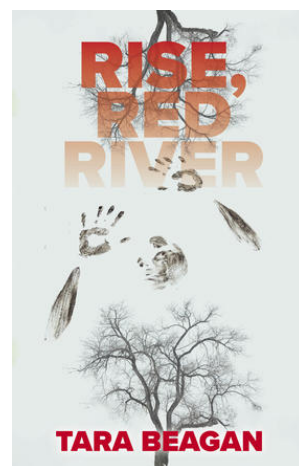
**edited by Donna-Michelle St. Bernard**  
Seven plays by contemporary First Nations and Metis playwrights cover the broad scope of residential school experiences



**by Tomson Highway**  
Seven rez women attempt to beat the odds by winning THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD for a chance to win a way out of a tortured life

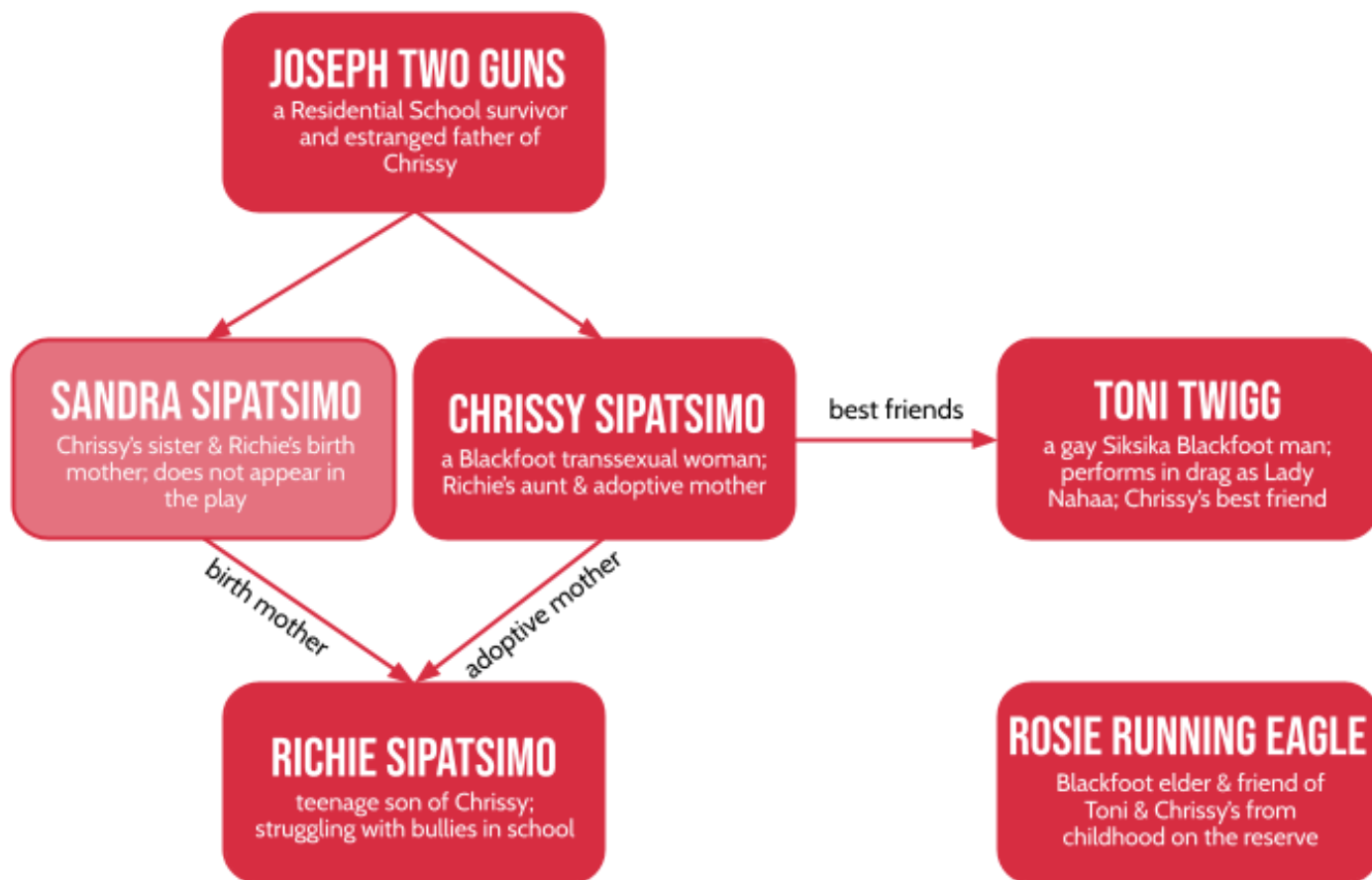


**by Cliff Cardinal**  
A subversive updating of Shakespeare's classic; the show features bawdy humour, difficult subject matter, and raw emotion



**by Tara Beagan**  
Inspired by Drag the Red, an organization that searches for evidence of missing Indigenous and settler women, girls, 2 Spirit, and people of all genders in the Red River of Treaty One Territory

# CHARACTER BREAKDOWN.



## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT | SABLE SWEETGRASS

Sable Sweetgrass is a mother, a writer, storyteller, and a member of the Kainai Nation in Southern Alberta. She was born and raised in Mohkinstsis (Calgary) and has worked in Indigenous arts and culture in the city. Sable is an activist in the Indigenous community creating awareness for Indigenous transgender and transsexual issues. Sable studied English at UCalgary and has her MFA in creative writing from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, NM. Her play **AWOOWAAKII**, a Blackfoot word meaning crossing over, is about a transgender woman and was performed at the Rubaboo Aboriginal Arts Festival in Edmonton and at Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto. Sable's focus is on creative writing, and she is working on her first novel.

# HISTORICAL + SOCIAL CONTEXT.



## 5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT THE TERM TWO-SPirit

- 1 Two-Spirit refers to Indigenous people who live their lives as neither men nor women.
- 2 They are often seen as combining or transcending masculine and feminine characteristics.
- 3 They have historically performed important social roles, held knowledge, led ceremonies, reared children, married, and lived in same-sex relationships.
- 4 Gender and sexuality were not understood in binary, “either/or” terms, before the arrival of Europeans to the land now known as Canada.
- 5 The term “Two-Spirit” was solidified by Indigenous communities across North America in 1990.

## TWO-SPirit ELDERS YOU SHOULD KNOW



**Talenny Rose Heavy Head** learned Blackfoot beliefs and values from relatives, with family deeply rooted in the Sundance ceremony of the Kainai Nation, earning the rights of a pipe carrier and sweat lodge keeper. Talenny supported this production.



**Ma-Nee Chacaby** a respected Two-Spirit Elder from northwestern Ontario, who attributes her Two-Spirit journey to her grandmother



**Albert McLeod** a knowledge-keeper and community advocate who is known as “the grandmother of Manitoba’s Two-Spirit movement”

## REGALIA & POWWOW DANCE



**Two Spirit dance and regalia**, including a brave stick and flat top hat, are meaningful expressions of identity and spirit, honoring the sacred role of Two Spirit people in cultural traditions.

**Blackfoot regalia**, often handmade, features intricate beadwork, quillwork, and symbols reflecting the wearer’s role, family, and connection to the land. Worn in ceremonies and dances, it carries deep cultural and spiritual meaning.

### Powwow Dance Styles

Traditional, Grass, Fancy, Hoop, Jingle, and Shawl

Each has distinct movements and regalia, celebrating heritage and strengthening community through rhythm and ceremony.



### LEARN MORE

[calgarystampede.com/  
powwow/dances](http://calgarystampede.com/powwow/dances)



## BLACKFOOT WORDS IN *AWOOWAAKII*

likaakiimaat (ee-ee-ka-kee-maat)	Try hard / persevere
Kitsiikakomim (g-it-see-g-ah-g-oh-m-ih-m)	I love you
Appanii (aa-pbaa-nee)	Moth / butterfly / dream beings
Kutoyiss (kgaat-tdoo-yees-saa)	Blood clot / legendary Blackfoot hero
Awoowaakii (ah-woah-wah-gee)	Siksikaitsitapi words for Two-Spirit People
Nina skitii paah'paakii (nin-nah-sgit-tss-bah-bah-gee)	

## RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE IMPACT OF RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

[Save the Evidence Archive](#)

[Indian Residential School Survivor Society](#)

[Assembly of First Nations](#)

[National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation](#)

[Residential School Interactive Map](#)

[Government of Canada Library & Archives](#)



Blackfoot Naming Ceremony for The Confluence Historic Site & Parkland in Calgary

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

### The significance of a Blackfoot Naming Ceremony

In Blackfoot culture, a name is given when a person has done something worthy of note. They also can get a name from an ancestor or relative who has passed on. A person can earn different names throughout their life, based on their accomplishments, spiritual transfers, and family history. Traditionally, Blackfoot people went by their one given name; the convention of first names and family names came from settlers.

Through colonization, naming practices were degraded by misspelling names, giving surnames to people who did not previously have them, and forbidding the use of Indigenous or traditional family names through residential schools.

**Reclaiming names is essential to the resurgence of Indigenous cultures and languages.**

## 3 CALLS TO ACTION!

1. **Learn the history** between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples
2. **Support Indigenous artists and businesses** (i.e., [Boy Chief Trading](#), [Authentically Indigenous Market](#), [Moonstone Creations](#), etc.)
3. **Attend Indigenous events** like Powwows

# WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE



## **An open mind.**

Let the performance surprise you! Stay open to what can happen. Look for moments of theatrical magic (how did they change that costume so quickly?) and unexpected dialogue.

## **Assigned seats.**

Every seat in the theatre offers a unique perspective on the action. Appreciate what you can see from your seat that someone else might not.

## **Live actors.**

The performers on stage can see you, hear you, and feel your energy. And actors love student audiences! Laugh when something is funny! Gasp when you're surprised! Applaud when you're impressed! The actors thrive on audience reactions.

## **A break from reality.**

Theatre-makers ask the audience to “suspend their disbelief.” If someone on stage says the red ribbon is blood, then it is! If an actor takes flight, then imagine you can't see the strings. This is what the actors ask of the audience. Embrace the magic of theatre.

## **Questions.**

Listen carefully to the story being told. If you have a question, keep your voice to a whisper so it doesn't disturb others. (See the call out on Q + As to help you form great questions for the team behind the show.) Let yourself be challenged by the content. What new ideas or perspectives are you hearing?

## **Disconnection.**

Put your phone away and immerse yourself in the technology of the theatre. The sounds and lights from your device are distracting to the actors, fellow audience members, and you! Plus, the law says that photos and videos aren't allowed, anyway.

## **PREPARING Q'S FOR A Q + A**

While you watch the show, consider how the creative team (see pg. 10) brings the story to life on stage for you.

Consider questions about the process:

- How did the lighting / set / costume / sound designer...
- What made the director choose to...
- How did the playwright decide to...

Ask questions about the story:

- Why did [character] make the decision to...
- Can you explain how...
- Why didn't \_\_\_\_\_ happen?

Learn more about each job:

- Why did you decide to become a...
- What do I need to do to become a...
- What has been your favorite...





# THEATRE TEAM TALKBACK

*Theatre is a 'team sport,' and it's not the actors alone who bring a production to life. After your show, you'll have a chance to ask questions of the creative team. Here are some of the folks you might expect to speak with:*

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**The Playwright** writes the script, sometimes from an original idea, and sometimes adapted from a book or story—decides what the characters say and, often, gives the designers guidelines on how the play should look.

**The Director** creates the vision for the production, how it will look on stage, and works closely with the actors, costume, set, and lighting designers to make sure everyone tells the same story.

**The Actors** use their bodies and voices to bring the playwright's words and the director's ideas to life on the stage.

**The Designers** imagine and create the lights, scenery, props, costumes, and sound that will compliment and tell the playwright's story in a way that matches the director's vision.

**The Stage Manager** assists the director during rehearsals by taking detailed notes and making sure the actors and designers understand these ideas. They run the show during each performance by making sure the actors' entrances and exits and the lights and sound all run smoothly.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

## IF YOU HAVE 15 MINUTES...

### Residential School Testimony

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*This brief lesson will allow students to listen to the surprising words of an Indian Residential School survivor and reflect on how her experience aligns with what they know or have heard about these schools.*

**Focus Question.** How do personal testimonials change the way we learn and gather information?

**Objective.** Students will be able to align their prior knowledge with the personal experiences from an Indian Residential School survivor.

#### Procedure.

- 1 Ask students to jot down 3-5 things that they have learned or heard about Canadian Indian Residential Schools.
- 2 Share a few thoughts aloud.
- 3 Introduce the [testimony series](#) filmed by Zacharias Kunuk and Peter Irniq.
- 4 Share [Helen Makasagak's testimony](#) (3:17)
- 5 Reflection questions to consider:
  - How does Ms. Makasagak's testimony align or differ from your prior knowledge about residential schools?
  - What is different about getting information about residential schools this way versus reading about it in a book?
  - What questions does this testimony raise for you about residential schools in Canada?

# IF YOU HAVE 30 MINUTES...

## A Story of Humility

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*This devising activity provides excerpted subtitles from They Came for the Children: Canada, aboriginal peoples, and the residential schools—a text created by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee to support high school curriculum around the history of Indian Residential Schools.*

**Focus Question.** How do we interpret text using mood, movement, and voice to tell a story?

**Objective.** Students will be able to internalize statements about Canada's history and interpret them theatrically.

**Procedure.**

- 1 Introduce these vocal and physical [Theatrical Conventions](#).
- 2 Present the [subheadings from the introduction](#) of *They Came for the Children*.
- 3 Divide students into 12 groups, assigning each one line from the introduction.
- 4 Ask them to utilize at least 2 physical conventions and 2 vocal conventions as they interpret their line.
- 5 Give groups time to make choices and explore before sharing as a class.

# IF YOU HAVE AN HOUR...

## Storytelling for Advocacy

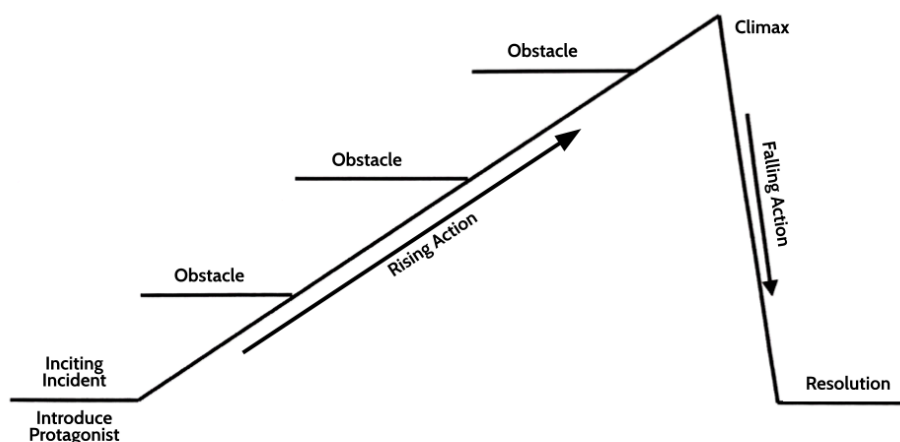
*Awoowaakii is Sable Sweetgrass's way of advocating for issues that are important in her life and community. This activity will guide students through the process of developing an advocacy story for an issue that is meaningful to them.*

**Focus Question.** How do we craft a meaningful story to advocate for issues that matter?

**Objective.** Students will be able to articulate a compelling story to advocate for something they want.

**Procedure.**

- 1 Prompt students to reflect on stories, characters, or current events that they find compelling. Discuss in partners, small groups, or as a whole class.
  - What is it about these narratives that draw their attention?
  - Why do they care?
  - Are there patterns or themes that emerge across the stories that interest them?
- 2 Chart their responses somewhere visible. (Ideally they have grabbed onto things like peer pressure, body image, climate change, rights for women, Indigenous, POC, or 2SLGBTQ+.) Continue to prompt them until there is a solid and broad list of social topics to explore.
- 3 Ask students to choose an issue that feels particularly pressing for them at the moment. It could be because it's local or someone in their family is affected personally, or it could just be an area of interest to them.
- 4 Show students the Story Arc (linked in this [accompanying slide deck](#)), and ask why it might look familiar.



- 5 Talk through the traditional story arc structure to review each of its components. Ask, “How might this help serve us when advocating for something we want to see changed?”
- 6 Guide students through the example (in the [slides](#)) to help them connect their own personal narrative to this greater issue.
- 7 Hand out the [worksheet](#), giving students time to work independently to map out their own advocacy story.
- 8 Allow students an opportunity to share their stories with a partner when they’re finished.

**EXTENSION.** Continue your exploration by looking into the varied types of advocacy (independent, systemic, or self). Discuss the ways that advocates make contact with those with the power to enact change (i.e., art-making, letter-writing, phone calls, social media, posters, advertisements, rallies, etc.). Provide students with space to make an advocacy plan.

# QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

A theatrical experience is not complete without reflection. What is the audience talking about when they leave the theatre? Here are some questions to pose to your students following their experience with *Awoowaakii* at Theatre Calgary.

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- 1 Where did you learn about sex and gender? How have your thoughts on gender and sexuality changed over time?
- 2 How does the generational gap between Richie, Chrissy & Toni, and Joseph influence their perspectives and the way they handle conflict? How might their communication style be a product of their generation?
- 3 How do the ways that the characters try to protect one another backfire? What would you do in their place?
- 4 How do the characters' relationships to Blackfoot traditions, such as the naming ceremony, impact their personal growth throughout the play?
- 5 If you were in Chrissy's position, would you have forgiven your father?



**THEATRE CALGARY PLAY GUIDES DEVELOPED BY**

Aliza Sarian

[www.alizasarian.com](http://www.alizasarian.com)