

From *Toby Or Not Toby*:

To start with, the big scandal has absolutely nothing to do with acting. It's true that there was a lot of controversy about the choice of Isaac Yellow Sky to play the lead. At least, at the beginning there was. Some people still think Tobias is the better actor and he got shafted. I'm going to come back to that in a minute. But that is not what this is about. And it's not about promoting indigenous people or how anybody feels about that. It's about *the team*; being loyal to the cause. Putting the cast and the crew and the production first; above any individual. You have to do that or nothing would ever happen in theatre. *Especially* in theatre. With all the gigantic egos and wacko attitudes theatre people sling around? Are you kidding me?

When you jeopardize the production because of your own personal agenda, you're putting a lot of people's livelihoods at risk; you're taking money out of their pockets. You're trashing all the time and work and focus that went into it all. Should someone be rewarded for humiliating everybody else? For deceiving everyone all that time? For putting their own selfish interests first?

As I said, acting ability has nothing to do with it. And by the way, who's to say if one actor is better than another? What does that really mean? Do you go by a handful of self-inflated critics in the media? By a poll of audience members? By one particular performance? Who judges how good an actor is? In the end, it really comes down to the producers and the directors, and the people who are putting money into the front end. Who do *they* think is best for a given job at a given time? If you were to choose a random sample of people and ask them whether someone is a good actor or not, you'd never get anything close to consensus; you'd get as many answers as people. It would be just like asking if a particular play or film is good. One person says it's great. The next guy says it sucks.

If you want my personal opinion? I think Tobias Peters is the better actor. He's had more experience. He's got a better voice; deeper, louder. He projects better. But that's just *my* opinion. Isaac is a good actor too. He's legitimate. He's had a range of acting jobs over the years. And people really like him; the people he works with and the audiences. He can act. And he's certainly paid his dues, especially all the other kinds of work he's had to do to pay the bills.

And so what if Theatre Manitoba gave Isaac a boost because he was indigenous? That was the point: to promote indigenous people in the mainstream arts. Everybody knew that. And it's a huge deal. The first indigenous actor to play Hamlet; the first indigenous actor to play a lead role in a Shakespeare play in Canada. Maybe the first in the world. It energized the whole production from day one. It instantly drew all kinds of positive media coverage, not just in Canada, but internationally. Free, widespread promotion, that theatre companies almost never get.

Obviously some people weren't particularly happy about the situation. They thought Tobias was a better actor and he should have gotten the lead role. Maybe they were thinking about their own jobs in the future. But it wasn't hidden or underhanded. And it worked out. Or, at least, it *was* working out.

For a long time, we weren't even sure the production was going to happen, because of Covid. Fortunately, we had access to vaccines in early February, and things worked out. Health restrictions were lifted right on schedule. We ended up having ten full weeks of rehearsal time, which was great.

By the time we got to opening night, nobody was saying a word about who was in the lead role. Nobody was doubting Isaac's ability or talking behind his back. Everyone was pulling in the same direction. Isaac was ready. We were all ready. It was going to be a good production. We were all pumped. We were all one big, happy family. And then things went off the rails.