



## NAOMI TESSLER



**Naomi Tessler** is a graduate of the Masters of Arts program in Educational Theatre for Colleges and Communities at New York University. She currently facilitates and develops [Branch Out Theatre](#) workshops and productions with organizations and groups in Toronto, Ottawa and the Gatineau area. As a facilitator, Naomi has an extensive background in Theatre of the Oppressed, Playback Theatre, acting, physical theatre, storytelling, directing and playwriting and strives to share these tools with those she works and collaborates with. In addition to being a dynamic workshop facilitator and director, Naomi also works as an actor, playwright, poet, singer and Reiki Master. She believes in uniting communities through theatre to build bridges and break through barriers.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Artist Naomi Tessler will lead Forum Theatre workshops at the Immigrant Women Services Ottawa. Participants will get the opportunity to develop theatre skills, build community and gain the confidence to speak up and act out about social issues. During these workshops, participants will act with a circle of women and will learn Forum Theatre and Community Arts Activism that will support them in their everyday life and will open the dialogue about social change. Naomi uses theatre as a tool for encouraging self-empowerment, self-confidence, environmental awareness, social justice and well-being.

## PARTNER SITE

[Immigrant Women Services Ottawa](#) (IWSO) is a haven for immigrant and visible minority women. At IWSO, we create opportunities for women as they integrate into a new society, rebuild their lives free of violence and achieve their personal goals.

## ABOUT ART PLACE

Art Place is a community outreach program of AOE Arts Council, funded in part by the Ontario Trillium Foundation. In its inaugural year, the new social practice professional artist-in-residence program will enable six jury selected artists and groups of artists the opportunity to offer unique free-of-charge artistic services in collaboration with community sites across the city of Ottawa. Each artist or arts group will be paired with a non-profit organization for a period of 5 to 8 weeks. The artists will work with a designated site partner and its participants to create an artistic project. Art Place will bring together different participants to work collaboratively and generate awareness for socially-driven issues.

# ACTING OUT FRUSTRATIONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

December 17, 2015

For the past two months, Forum theatre artist Naomi Tessler has been leading a series of theatre workshops with a group of women at the Immigrant Women Services Ottawa (IWSO). Together they have created a Forum theatre play called *New Country New Conflicts*, which consists of worst case scenarios addressing issues that these women are struggling with. The purpose of the play is to invite the audience to come on stage and step into the action to rehearse changes they can create to resolve those conflicts. Ultimately, this play is intended to help create a wider community dialogue about the challenges that immigrant women face.

We asked a few questions to Naomi Tessler to find out a little bit more about the project.

## Can you tell us about your art discipline?

My main practice is theatre, specifically using theatre as a tool for social change. I am focussing mainly on the work of [Augusto Boal](#) and drawing from his body of work known as [Theatre of the Oppressed](#), from which [Forum theatre](#) originated.

With the Art Place project, I have been sharing my skills in improvisation, storytelling and playback theatre. I have been using image theatre and Forum theatre to guide a group of five women in creating a play that addresses issues that they are experiencing as immigrant women.

## How would you describe the process?

The process starts by building a sense of trust, a sense of community, a sense of openness, and



sharing personal experiences and stories. Beginning with different games and techniques, participants are invited to express their experiences and listen to each other's stories. From there, we define the issues that are important to the group and that they want to address as immigrant women. We then explore how they can resolve or attempt to resolve some of these conflicts that they are up against. When we have decided on these issues; we work together to define the scenes and characters that are going to be in the play. Then I go home and I write a skeleton, an outline of a script, that I bring back to the group. The group provides feedback, telling me what works and what doesn't work; adding what is missing or taking away the unwanted parts until we feel that there is a collective script.

From there we begin rehearsals and I train the group in improvisation so that they can be fully prepared for the Forum theatre play. They perform the play twice, the first time as it is and the second time the audience is invited to become what's called a "spect-actor". They go from watching the play as passive spectators to active "spect-actors", stepping into the action of the play to rehearse how to resolve some of the conflicts being presented. The actors are then trained to improvise and respond to what the audience members will be bringing on stage.



## Why did you decide to work with immigrant women?

As a woman, I feel really passionate about working with other women to support them,

have their voices heard, their stories shared, build community and solidarity, and really stand up for women's rights. We have come a long way as women but there's a long way to go and I recognize that women from different countries have different experiences regarding their rights. I also feel really passionate about working in a supportive and empowering environment and happy to provide them with opportunities to grow, to express themselves and to find common ground.

**What are some of the biggest positive outcomes of this project?**

It has been a really positive experience for those who have participated, as they got to meet each other, share their stories, and have a safe and open space to talk candidly. There were a lot of tears shed at one point when the women were talking about the challenging stories that they have lived here. I witnessed a lot of comradery.

Also, the chance to perform is new for a lot of the women in the group. They are all natural actors and very expressive, even though they have never done it, either in their home countries or here. These women are really excited to have the new opportunity to act as an advocate for immigrant women, to support each

other and to stir a dialogue and create community change.



**What do you hope the public will learn from this play?**

I hope that the public will learn about some of the issues that these immigrant women are facing, whether they are immigrant or non-immigrant women. Also, recognizing themselves as maybe someone who has perpetuated these issues of discrimination, and really having a reflection on how, as members of society, we can be more loving, more welcoming, more compassionate, more open, not just to immigrants, but to everybody in our society.

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