

CULTURE

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DANCE



COURTESY OF HAUI

"Private Flowers" is a short film directed by multi-disciplinary artist Haui in collaboration with the film's two performers, Rodney Diverlus, left, and Jera Wolfe.

Shedding light on a dark time

'Private Flowers' brings new life to a forgotten story of forbidden love

MICHAEL CRABB
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

History always comes with footnotes. Most of them pass unnoticed. Mixed-media/multi-disciplinary artist Haui has a mission to throw light on them. His goal is to broaden the historical narrative to embrace more inclusive and diverse perspectives.

Among Haui's recently illuminated footnotes is the true story of a lowly British infantryman in the then colony of Upper Canada who in 1832 was hanged for having sex with another man. The little we know of him is that his rank was that of a private and that his family name was Flowers. In the annals of justice during that era, he was one of many to suffer the same fate but in Haui's imagining *Private Flowers* becomes emblematic of the fact that, persecuted or not, gay men have always been among us and are neither to be feared nor reviled.

"Queer love is such a simple thing, really," said Haui, "but right now we need to understand that more than ever."

Haui was already exploring different ideas about masculinity when the opportunity arose to create a site-specific work for Toronto History Museums as part of its "Awakenings" artist mentorship program. The result, unveiled in a former munitions magazine at Fort York National Historic Site during last month's Pride and on view daily through Sept. 3, is "Private Flowers," a short dance film directed by Haui and collaboratively choreo-

graphed with its two A-list performers, Rodney Diverlus and Jera Wolfe.

"They're not just incredible dancers and performers," said Haui. "They're also amazing actors. Working with them felt very organic. It was the most rewarding collective collaboration I've done in a long time."

Although they were very aware of each other — the Canadian dance community is tight-knit — Diverlus and Wolfe had never worked together.

"We're opposites in many ways," said Diverlus. "Apart from the topic and the content, a lot of the draw for me was to see how our two styles could come together."

Haui, Diverlus and Wolfe took advantage of studio time provided by the National Ballet of Canada's Open Spaces program, which encourages participation by members of Toronto's BIPOC and LGBTQ communities, to explore a range of ideas.

"We probably had two or three different versions worked out before we got to Fort York," explained Wolfe, who first met Haui in the early aughts when they were in their mid-teens studying dance in Kelowna, B.C. Wolfe went on to pursue professional dance training at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Haui studied acting at Toronto Metropolitan University where he got to know Diverlus, then in the dance program.

Transferring from the big, brightly lit open space of a National Ballet studio to a damp, cold cellar at Fort York entailed a lot of adjustment yet in a way the confining space served as a powerful metaphor for forbidden love, just as dance was able to evoke meanings that words could not match.

"I was a good dancer but I always had a craving for words," explained Haui. "Now I've come back to dance with a greater appreciation of how



Haui, above, created the site-specific work for Toronto History Museums as part of its "Awakenings" artist mentorship program. The short film shows daily at Fort York National Historic Site through Sept. 3.

BEN RENZELLA

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HAUI
ARTIST

the form is able to explore interiority and psychology."

After an introductory caption outlining the bare bones of *Flowers'* tragic story, the film unfolds as an extended male pas de deux, shot on location at Fort York. Period military jackets set the early 19th-century context but the dance itself is as much an abstract assertion of the love that can exist between men as it is a reminder of how brutally it was suppressed in what Haui calls a "dark chapter" in the history of Canada's LGBTQ community.

With its slow-motion sequences and layering of images, "Private Flowers" at times shifts into an almost surreal mode and covers a gamut of human emotions as the two men grapple with attraction, fear and a longing for physical and emotional connection.

"There's a multitude of layers that people can interpret for themselves," said Haui. "I just want visitors to know we're not footnotes any more."

The City of Toronto operates 10 history museums. In addition to Fort York, these include Colborne Lodge, Gibson House Museum, Mackenzie House, Market Gallery, Montgomery's Inn, Scarborough Museum, Spadina Museum, Todmorden Mills and Zion Schoolhouse.

In late 2020, in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's findings and, more immediately, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder that May of George Floyd, the city announced a new program to address the widely perceived lack of representation in the blinkered way Toronto's past has been recounted. Under the banner "Awakenings," the initial focus was to address the concerns of the BI-

POC community by commissioning — it was the pandemic — virtual online visual art projects.

As "Awakenings" has evolved, the easing of the pandemic has permitted in-person encounters whereby site visitors can observe how commissioned artists have reflected on the neglected stories connected to the city-run museums.

"It's about opening up these spaces to new audiences who didn't necessarily feel inclined to go before because they simply reflected the dominant narrative," explained Haui.

In 2022, "Awakenings" broadened its scope to include the LGBTQ community with the projects, 10 in total, commissioned in time for Pride 2023. Several of these, like Haui's, remain in place throughout the summer.

Haui, who is currently working as the live video designer for the Shaw Festival production of Edith Wharton's mystery drama, "The Shadow of a Doubt," is already preparing to shine a light on another forgotten Canadian historical footnote.

Although we know a lot more about Nova Scotian contralto Portia White, the first Black Canadian concert performer to achieve international fame, than we do about *Private Flowers*, her name is now largely forgotten. In response, Haui has written the libretto for a Canadian Opera Company commissioned work called "Aportia Chrytych," which he will also direct in its June 2024 premiere.

"Spoken word, rap, folk songs, hip-hop, R&B, and classic opera repertoire collide in an explosive score that seeks to break down musical silos and unite artistic and cultural communities," reads the new opera's official description. It sounds like quite the ride.