



For more than three decades, Josa Maule has coached thousands of actors through her Montreal School of Performing Arts, which she launched in 1992 with \$1,000 in her pocket, becoming a fixture in Montreal's film and television industry. (Cassandra Leslie/Ciel Photo)

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**CBC Quebec is highlighting people from the province's Black communities who are giving back, inspiring others and helping to shape our future. These are the 2023 Black Changemakers.**



It was a long shot. In 1992, with just \$1,000 in her pocket — a gift from an uncle — Josa Maule followed her dream, renting space at the Atwater Library in downtown Montreal to open an acting school: the Montreal School of Performing Arts (MSOPA).

To keep the school afloat in those early days, Maule moonlighted in telephone sales, flogging ads for a local weekly, the Montreal Suburban.

"I instilled in my students that you've got to start somewhere, and if you're going to do this, then do this with all your might," she said. "If I was doing this for money, I would not be doing what I'm doing."

A born performer, Maule says that at the age of eight, she directed and produced shows in her parents' basement and would proudly charge adults \$1 for a seat.

And it all paid off.

Over more than three decades, Maule has coached thousands of actors — both amateurs and professionals — and cast local and international productions, including the Oscar-nominated feature *War Witch* (2012).

She has also written and staged plays, such as the 2017 production *A Story of a Black Woman in Memory of Angelique*, about the enslaved Black woman Marie-Josée Angélique, who was convicted of arson, then tortured and hanged in Montreal in 1734.



Josa Maule wrote, directed and produced *Sounds of Colour*, an annual show celebrating Black history. This is the 2005 cast. (Submitted by Josa Maule)

Maule's dedication to her school is rooted in a belief that everyone should experience acting, even if they don't plan on pursuing it as a career.

"It's such a journey to explore yourself and your creativity, and it gives you such confidence and empowerment," she said. "Nothing beats a failure but a try."

## **Breaking a leg, not the bank**

Maule also wanted to make theatre more accessible to the public.





an hour, and audiences could enjoy affordable drama over coffee and cake.

That's how Hazgary Colin got his big break 20 years ago, landing his first major commercial thanks to Maule.

"You remember your first big moments, and I had a lot of those with Josa," he said.

"I consider her to be my godmother of show biz," said Colin, who has worked as an actor full time ever since. "She has the eye of the industry."

As an acting coach, Maule is not afraid to dole out criticism, he said.

"She doesn't sugar-coat it," said Colin. "That feedback: it helps you grow, and it helps you pinpoint exactly what you need to work on."

## Diversifying productions

Because she is Black, Maule says many people in the film and television industry assumed she only worked with performers of colour. She has even had production companies tell her not to recommend "too many dark-skinned people" for their films.

But she has never been afraid to follow her instincts.

"Sometimes, in casting, they don't know what they're looking for," she said.

Maule's hunch paid off for Mexican actor Pilar Cazares, whom Maule encouraged to audition for a role in the 2008 Montreal independent comedy *Who is KK Downey?* Cazares had only been in Canada for a year and was still learning to speak English when she nabbed the role.



Mexican actor Pilar Cazares says working with Josa Maule at the Montreal School of Performing Arts helped her to overcome insecurities about having a Spanish accent when auditioning for English-speaking roles. (Submitted by Pilar Cazares)

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"Back then, it was even more clear that there were way, way less opportunities for people, you know, with accents, people of colour," Cazares said.

She counted her blessings for finding MSOPA and Maule.

"For me, that was the door," she said.

Maule credits her deep faith and following her gut for sustaining her school, despite the precarious nature of the industry.

"I've learned to embrace what's around me and not, you know, not to look and see what other people are doing," she said.

"Waking up in the morning and doing what you love to do is success."

*The Black Changemakers is a special series recognizing individuals who, regardless of background or industry, are driven to create a positive impact in their community. From tackling problems to showing small gestures of kindness on a daily basis, these changemakers are making a difference and inspiring others. [Meet all the changemakers here.](#)*



*For more stories about the experiences of Black Canadians — from anti-Black racism to success stories within the Black community — check out *Being Black in Canada*, a CBC project Black Canadians can be proud of. [You can read more stories here.](#)*