

Trailblazing Actor, Producer, and Advocate **Tonya Williams** appointed to the **Order of Canada** for her five decades of pioneering work in Canadian media and representation

From breaking barriers on screen to founding **Reelworld**, Williams is honoured for her lasting impact on equity, storytelling, and cultural change

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Acclaimed actor, producer, and cultural changemaker **Tonya Williams** has been appointed to the **Order of Canada**, one of the country's highest civilian honours. The appointment recognizes Williams' exceptional five-decade career in Canadian arts and culture, including her trailblazing work as one of the first Black performers on Canadian television, and her tireless advocacy for inclusion, equity, and community-led storytelling in the film and television industry.

Williams began her screen career in the late 1970s, breaking barriers at a time when Black representation in Canadian media was nearly non-existent. An alumna of the **Ryerson Drama Program** (now **Toronto Metropolitan University**), she appeared in some of the country's most beloved and recognizable programs, including ***Polka Dot Door***, and became a national presence on ***Boogie***, the ***Wear a Moustache*** milk commercials, and co-starring in the first US sitcom series filmed in Canada, ***Check It Out*** alongside **Don Adams**. She was also one of the first Black women to co-host the **Miss Teen Canada** pageant for three consecutive years (beginning in 1985), and starred in CTV's ***Welcome to My World***. These early milestones marked the beginning of a groundbreaking career, one that helped reshape the Canadian entertainment landscape and inspired generations of performers who followed.

Internationally, Williams is best known for her acclaimed 19-year role on ***The Young and the Restless***, a platform she consistently used to celebrate and spotlight her Canadian identity. Throughout her time on the show, she remained vocal about Canada's rich talent pool and the urgent need for more inclusive storytelling in North American media.

In 2000, Williams founded the **Reelworld Film Festival** and later the **Reelworld Foundation**, establishing one of Canada's most enduring platforms dedicated to advancing racial equity and systemic change in the screen industries. As the festival and year-round programs expanded, she renamed the organization **Reelworld Screen Institute** in 2023, which now houses all aspects of **Reelworld** including the **Reelworld Film Festival**, **Access Reelworld** (a national hiring database), and the two-day **Reelworld Summit**. Now celebrating its 25th anniversary, **Reelworld** continues to amplify the voices of Black, Indigenous, Asian, South Asian, and other racially diverse storytellers, while influencing hiring practices, policy reform, and industry funding priorities. It remains one of the few national institutions with a deep, sustained commitment to inclusion, anti-racism, and access in Canadian media.

Established in 1967, the **Order of Canada** recognizes outstanding achievement, dedication to the community, and service to the nation. With its motto ***Desiderantes meliorem patriam*** ("**They desire**

a better country”), the **Order** acknowledges individuals whose work has made a lasting impact on Canada and the world. Recipients are appointed by the **Governor General** on the recommendation of an independent advisory council. Appointments are made for sustained excellence across three levels: **Companion, Officer, and Member**. Williams has been appointed as an **Officer of the Order of Canada (O.C.)**, a distinction that recognizes achievement and merit of a high degree, particularly service to Canada or humanity at large.

*“This honour is deeply meaningful,” said **Tonya Williams**. “It represents the totality of my journey, one that started in an industry where I rarely saw myself reflected. From those early moments on Canadian television, to my time in the U.S., and through building Reelworld, I’ve always been guided by the belief that there is power in inclusion. It has been my joy to blend my passion for the work with my passion for seeing more diversity on our screens. I carry my pride as a Canadian Black woman into everything I do, always striving to shine a positive light on my community wherever I go. I share this honour with every artist, every advocate, and every underrepresented voice who continues to push this country forward.”*

Williams joins a distinguished group of **Order of Canada** recipients whose work has shaped the country’s cultural identity. Her legacy as a creator, advocate, and changemaker continues to open doors and pave the way for future generations of Canadian talent.

About Tonya Williams

Tonya Williams is a Canadian award-winning actress, producer, and advocate, best known for her roles in various television shows, including **Polka Dot Door** and her 19-year portrayal of *Dr. Olivia Winters* on **The Young and the Restless**. Throughout her career, she has received numerous awards, including two **NAACP Image Awards** for *Outstanding Actress in a Daytime Series*, two **Emmy nominations**, the **2023 Visionary Award** from the **Legacy Awards**, and the **2024 Changemaker Award** from the **Canadian Screen Awards**. In 2025, she was inducted into **Canada's Walk of Fame**.

In 2000, Tonya founded the **Reelworld Film Festival**, now known as **Reelworld Screen Institute**, to create opportunities and support the career development of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour in the Canadian screen industries. In 2020, she established **Access Reelworld**, which is Canada's largest searchable recruitment platform for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour creatives in the screen industries.

About Reelworld

Reelworld was founded in 2000 by award-winning actress and producer **Tonya Williams** to amplify films and media led by racialized and Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, Métis) people and to increase access to creative, career and leadership opportunities in Canada’s screen industries. Its acclaimed **Reelworld Film Festival+Summit** welcomes audiences annually to experience the best of Canadian cinema and connect with a diverse network of industry changemakers. To encourage growth and inclusion in the sector, the **Reelworld Screen Institute** platforms and supports the creative and career development of Indigenous and racialized professionals through high-impact training programs. Through **Access Reelworld**—Canada’s largest open directory of racialized and Indigenous

crew and talent—and the **Reelworld Foundation**, a registered charity, Reelworld is leading systemic transformation and accountability toward a more equitable and vibrant industry.

For more information, please visit:

www.gg.ca/en/media

www.reelworld.ca

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Tonya Williams

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