

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

A Micro-Conference for the Indie Arts Sector:

A collaborative forum for imagining paths forward as a community



*Toronto Fringe in partnership with
The Creative Innovation Studio at FCAD, Ryerson University*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

OVERVIEW	3
SUBJECT: PAST	4
“What Was Working?”	4
Community	4
Opportunities.....	4
Diversity	5
Flexibility.....	5
“What Wasn’t Working?”	5
Exclusion	5
Financial Security.....	5
Working Conditions.....	6
SUBJECT: PRESENT	7
Institutional Support.....	7
Resources For Digital Creation.....	7
Financial Security.....	8
Institutional Transparency.....	8
Community	8
Community & Collaboration.....	9
Leadership.....	9
SUBJECT: FUTURE	10
More Institutional Support	10
More Diversity/Innovation	10
Solidarity (Artist To Artist And Artist To Public).....	11

OVERVIEW

“Should I Stay or Should I Go?” was a virtual micro-conference for participants involved with the indie theatre arts sector in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The event was hosted by Toronto Fringe in partnership with Ryerson’s Creative Innovation Studio at FCAD. The goal of the event was to invite members of the Toronto indie theatre community to participate in a frank and forward-thinking conversation on the future of arts work in a pandemic and post-pandemic era. Participants were guided through exercises to forecast and (re)imagine how theatre, performance, and live experiences must evolve in the coming months, years, and beyond. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the indie network has been severely impacted by the halting of public events and live theatre-making (March 2020 - present).

Contributors were asked to ruminate on this disruption through various thought-exercises, reflections, and questions pertaining to the past, present, and future of the indie arts sector:

How will our work come back? What new forms can it become? How might our sector evolve to support its creators and artists and workers, now and in the future? What are models that are sustainable long term, and can weather future storms?

Participants were divided into 10 breakout rooms over Zoom to reflect on the above questions and contribute their responses to a collaborative, online document. These collaborative documents and their subsequent answers from participants served as the data collection that was analyzed and disseminated through this research report that focuses on imagining paths forward as a community in the Toronto indie theatre arts sector.

SUBJECT: PAST

“WHAT WAS WORKING?”

On the topic of “Past”, participants were asked to ruminate on the state of the Toronto Theatre sector pre-COVID-19 pandemic, and critically analyze both the affordances and perils for creatives, performers, entrepreneurs, and workers in this artistic field. Roughly 50 participants across 10 breakout rooms were asked to contribute to a collaborative document outlining these two concepts; “what was working?” and “what wasn’t working?” in the Toronto theatre sector pre-COVID pandemic. In an overall survey of results, specific patterns began to emerge in the answers participants provided to both aforementioned questions.

COMMUNITY

In response to “what was working?” in the sector pre-pandemic, a majority of participants stated that the aspect of “community” and “community building” was one of the Toronto theatre industry’s greatest strengths. Broadly, the term “community” took the form in answers such as “strong community”, “sense of community”, “connecting with the community”, “open community”, and “ability to connect with a community of creators”. Other answers from participants provided peripheral terms such as “networking”, “collaborative structure”, and “finding like-minded people”. Interestingly, a recurring pattern occurred of participants tying the concept of “community” to specific spaces like theatres, bars, popular hangout spots, as well as specific events such as “Fringe” and “opening-night parties”. Community, in this case, was not only tied to an ideology but also to spatiality and temporality with some participants noting that “running into your peers in community spaces” and networking events were a key, positive feature of the theatre sector pre-pandemic. Overwhelmingly, themes related to “community” garnered the most responses from participants.

OPPORTUNITIES

The second most common answer to the question “what was working?” was, broadly, “opportunities”. Answers pertaining to “opportunities” included references to “mentorships”, “travel grants”, “discounts”, and “training programs”. Though it was not explicitly clear who these opportunities were for or afforded to, few responses did indicate opportunities specifically for newcomers to the sector were a positive feature of the industry pre-pandemic.

DIVERSITY

In addition to “opportunity”, the theme of “diversity” garnered a similar number of responses from participants with few answers demonstrating that “diverse avenues of storytelling”, “diversity of artistic scene”, and “multidisciplinary collaborations” was a feature of the sector that worked. Peripheral answers to this theme included “exploring the intercultural approach to creation” and “initiatives to cultivate future audiences”.

FLEXIBILITY

Very few participants noted that “flexibility” (i.e. “flexible schedules” and “freedom of contract work”) was a positive feature of the sector pre-pandemic, and only one participant stated that financial stability for established players (“significant budgets for big companies”) was a “working” feature of the industry.

“WHAT WASN’T WORKING?”

In response to the question “what wasn’t working?” in the sector pre-pandemic, participants’ suggestions mirrored and stayed overall relative to the responses to the former question “what was working?”

EXCLUSION

In sharp contrast to the idea of “community” being the most popular response to the question “what was working?”, feedback from participants suggested that, broadly, “exclusion” was a key component of factors that hindered the theatre scene before the pandemic. The theme of “exclusion” took on a variety of meanings; for instance, the insular nature of the industry with responses such as “favoritism”, “nepotism”, “not enough roles for emerging artists - those roles go to people who are already in”, and “you had to be in the room, but how do you get in the room?”. “Exclusion” also meant excluding particular and/or marginalized groups from the mainstream with responses such as “ageism”, “sexism”, “racism”, “focus on physical appearance”, and “accessibility (socioeconomic, physical, cultural)”. Other participants noted that the community isn’t quite as “open” as it appears to be, and that inherited ideas of success as defined by institutions (training, education, governmental, and funding bodies) are still the dominant ideology for what constitutes an “artist” in this sector.

FINANCIAL SECURITY

Comparatively, “financial security” and other peripherally related responses on financial stability in the theatre sector were nearly as common as “exclusion” for “what wasn’t working”. A recurring response under this umbrella was “funding” which came both from institutional funding/grant models (i.e. “not enough grants”, “the granting bodies determined categories that make it hard to acquire funding” and

"lack of affordable theatre/creation spaces to make the independent theatre financially viable"). Others noted "salary" discrepancies in the industry (i.e. " huge disparity between admin salaries/compensation vs artist compensation" and "lack of consistent full-time compensating theatre jobs that aren't administrative". Many participants pointed out that secondary jobs were essential to not only their livelihood but also to keep their artistic practice afloat with responses such as "Independent creators needed second jobs to support their art" and "unless you can subsidize your income, many opportunities are not available to you". Other more general responses relating to, broadly, financial security were "Lack of inconsistent pay. Or, lack of pay for smaller, indie productions", "too hard to make ends meet", "people work for free because they want experience, but that's not fair", "UBI [Universal Basic Income] needed", "artists living in poverty" and "challenging to earn a full-time living".

WORKING CONDITIONS

The third most popular response to the question "what wasn't working" revolved around the theme of work habits, work environments, work ideologies, and work schedules. "The toxic hustle", as more than one participant noted, was a prevalent and normalized ideology in terms of working conditions. Other responses in this realm included "being spread thin", "glorification of busy", "work periods that feel rushed, crammed, overwhelming", "chaotic schedules" and "unhealthy rehearsal processes". Peripherally, some responses indicated that the community was also "competitive", in one particular response, because of supply/demand ratios for actors in the industry. This "scarcity mindset", as one participant noted, leads to "having to say yes for everything" which then amplifies the ethos of the "toxic hustle".

SUBJECT: PRESENT

After the analysis of “what was working?” and “what wasn’t working?” in the past, participants were asked to bring the conversation into the present moment and examine the current state of the theatre industry amid the pandemic. The groups were asked to contribute to a collaborative document outlining two central questions; “what do we need?” and “how do we get it?”. Participants across all groups were asked to think about best practices, aspirations, desires, and needs of the theatre sector during the pandemic, and how best individuals, institutions, communities, and governing bodies can reach those goals. Responses collected highlighted 3 main themes that garnered a similar amount of participation.

“WHAT DO WE NEED?”

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Broadly, “institutional support” was one of three main themes that emerged in the collection of data. Vaguely, many responses pointed to the notion of “support” without further detail such as “social support”, “need more support for independent artists” and “more social safety nets”. More specifically, a few responses noted that “increased mental health support” such as “therapy” and “mental health resources” were currently lacking for arts workers during the pandemic. Other responses under this umbrella theme included “access to labor/worker protection”, “equity” and “industry standards for labor/worker expectations”.

RESOURCES FOR DIGITAL CREATION

An overwhelming number of participants also noted that “resources for digital creation” were essential for the community at this present time. Due to the pandemic, live events such as theatre have had to find creative pivots in order to move into the digital realm (i.e. Zoom Improv shows). Many participants have found this shift to be outside their realm of knowledge and thus inaccessible. In response to “what do we need?”, individuals noted “training and understanding on how to create digital theatre” as one of their top priorities. Similar responses included “acquired tech skills”, “recording studios theatre groups can access”, “video experience”, “camera/video gear” and “the arts sector needs to represent itself in a way that I can use to make new digital tools”. Some participants asked rhetorical questions as a response, such as “audience and performer connection- how do we get that back and forth in the digital realm we live in?”, “Theatre is an experiential thing that transforms the space around us: how do we do that with digital media?” and “Going to the theatre is a full ritual/experience. How do we encompass all of those elements at home?”. It is interesting to note that the “need”, in this case, was not solely in tactile technologies (i.e.

cameras, studios, gear) but also in the knowledge of how to replicate a traditional theatre experience in virtual space.

FINANCIAL SECURITY

Similar to responses garnered from the question “what wasn’t working” on the subject of the past, answers related to the theme “financial security” were also prevalent in this category. In terms of “what do we need?” at present, participants noted that government initiatives such as the Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit “shouldn’t just end”. Further to this point, the topic of Universal Basic Income was also discussed for the needs of the community at this current moment in time as well as broader concepts of “equitable distribution of wealth”. These responses, though not specific to the theatre sector, were recurring ideas that pointed to major shifts in societal and political hegemony. In addition, participants noted that the industry needed more “funding”, “monetary support for both theatre and digital theatre”, and “money to hire staff”.

INSTITUTIONAL TRANSPARENCY

In addition to the three major responses, as noted above, participants also suggested that increased transparency and clarity on account of institutions and governing bodies is critical at this present time. Many pointed out the vague and confusing nature of guidelines enacted upon the theatre industry in terms of what is and is not possible during the lockdown. Responses on this topic included “clarity of rules around what sort of art I can make and how audiences can interact with it”, “We need clear guidelines from the government”, as well as the question “why is filming allowed and not theatre?”. In addition to answers regarding unclear guidelines, the notion of transparency also encapsulated issues of communication breakdown between art workers and institutions, noting a need for “Transparency - pay structures, programming decisions, etc.” and “Introspection to practices (hiring, etc.)”.

COMMUNITY

A smaller group of participants noted that the aspect “community” was a need of the theatre sector at this current moment, however it must be noted that it did not take as much precedence as the former topics. That being said, responses in this category included “further opportunities to find ways to connect and collaborate”, “it feels like you are floundering by yourself in the indie theatre industry” as well as the question “Toronto can be very cliquey in the theatre community. How do we demystify this?”. The topic of “community”, in this case, was more tied to ideology and feelings of isolation rather than on concrete initiatives to foster a sense of community during the pandemic.

“HOW DO WE GET IT?”

COMMUNITY & COLLABORATION

In response to the question “how do we get it?” (i.e. “how do we get our above needs met?”), the most recurring answer was through community and collaboration. Since most forms of art and art-making are shifting into the virtual realm due to social distancing measures, many participants pointed towards more diverse collaboration as a present necessity to getting their needs met. As one participant noted, “collaboration is key. It helps us elevate each other”. Specific answers relating to cross-sector collaboration included “partnering for beta testing new technology”, “Artists to join our capacity-building resources so that artists can contribute to the digital tools being designed.” and “reaching out to film equipment centers”. Others mentioned “skill-sharing opportunities”, “finding collaborators”, “pitch platforms”, “meet-ups”, and “community forums” to strengthen this notion of community and collaboration. Many offered more general contributions to this theme with responses such as “unite - the artist alone can only make incremental change, a population momentum is what ultimately changes political landscape”, “we need to actively change the mentality of a ‘small finite pie” and “connecting and collaborating with people, can drive the costs down if you find people with diverse skill sets.”

LEADERSHIP

Since “institutional support” and “institutional transparency” were overarching themes in the section “what do we need?”, it is not surprising that “changes at the institutional level” was a common response as a present solution. Many participants responded that the theatre sector needed leadership for clarity within times of great change; “look for leaders to step up”, “we’re getting burnt out. we need other people with other skills (fighting skills) on our side to bolster us and join the cause and move it in the right way” and “some of our sector leaders willing to embrace fundamental change, but some hanging on - they need to go”. Other participants noted that the leadership comes from within the community itself saying “we’re waiting for a movement/leader to get behind, but it’s us” and “the leaders we are waiting for are us, we have to do the thing. what is the thing? what is the action that will work? we’ve done demonstrations, petitions, letters, phone zaps”. Some called for “unionization” as the answer to “how do we get our needs met”. Though no clear conclusion can be drawn from the varying opinions on this subject, responses regarding leadership, community, and more communication as tools for change within the sector were prevalent.

SUBJECT: FUTURE

Looking forward to the future of the creative sector, participants were asked to engage in a thought exercise and imagine what they wanted the future of independent creation to look like. Furthermore, what are the aspirations, hopes, desires, and needs of the theatre community post-pandemic? Similar to the topic of the present, they were then asked to ruminate on the many ways the sector could achieve those desires as individuals or as a collective.

“WHAT DO YOU WANT THE FUTURE OF INDEPENDENT CREATION TO LOOK LIKE?”

MORE INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Overwhelmingly, answers pertaining to “institutional support” garnered a significant response from participants. In the future, participants wish to see larger, established theatre companies offering more support to indie companies and performers. This was reflected in the desire for mentorship opportunities, collaborations, funding/grants, and, broadly shared skills from larger, dominant theatre companies. Though not exclusive to “institutional support”, the idea of *solidarity* amongst all theatre sector performers and employees was a recurring theme. Further to this theme, support from government organizations and arts councils also topped the list of answers to the question “what do you want the future of independent theatre to look like?”. Quite obviously, grants/funding opportunities were a common topic as were calls for more affordable and accessible spaces/venues for indie artists. There were also calls for more visibility of the indie theatre scene – whether through advertising funds, government initiatives, art sector publicity, or “strengthening of public engagement sectors”.

MORE DIVERSITY/INNOVATION

Coming out of this pandemic, a popular response amongst participants is that they wanted the indie theatre sector to be more diverse and inclusive. Whether taking shape in the diversity of performers, platforms, power structures, or stories showcased on stage, the responses noted that diversity and inclusion have a direct tie to the cultural importance of indie theatre. Specific responses on this theme included “other voices in the room - racialized, queer, etc.”, “sociocultural change makes theatre more equitable, diversifying the range and ways of stories being told”, “consciousness of neurodiversity”, “more disability artists”, and “escape from gender-binary; heteronormativity”. This theme was also covered in answers pertaining to championing egalitarian structures of power - regardless of age, experience level, or previous professional affiliations (i.e. “need to close the generational gap” and “trust in the younger generation (the idea of “paying your dues” evaporates)”). The notion of diversity also applied to diversity

amongst skill sets and styles of theatre produced, including more “experimental theatre”, “leveraging technologies”, “telling new stories”, “use more spaces for theatre”, “hybrid business models”, and a focus on theatre as an “environmentally sustainable” form of creation.

SOLIDARITY (ARTIST TO ARTIST and ARTIST TO PUBLIC)

Lastly, looking forward to the future, participants noted they wanted to see more solidarity amongst both the public and the theatre community and amongst members of the community itself (no matter what level, hierarchy, role in the community, etc.). Many participants responded to this question stating that the theatre industry has largely been undervalued in the arts sector, and more broadly, in the view of the public. Coming out of this pandemic, their wish was to change this mindset and have the broader public champion its cultural value. Specific responses on this theme included “the industry has to prove relevance to the general public”, “culture being recognized as essential” “Use more spaces for theatre (meet audiences where they are)” and “make audiences appreciate art/theatre”. In terms of solidarity amongst the community/sector itself, like many answers that came before, participants noted they wish to see a stronger collaborative structure in the indie arts sector. Doing away with competitiveness in the industry would open up the opportunity for more resources, knowledge sharing, and skill strengthening for all (industry professionals or newcomers to the field alike). Responses on this theme included “collaborate and promote together as opposed to in opposition”, “more opportunities to meet, share ideas, collaborations”, “Multi-disciplinary multi-sector collaboration”, “Collaborations between artists of unique and opposing backgrounds/experience” and “indie companies come together - indie artists collaborate together”. This call for more equitable sharing and more collaboration also ties into the notion of fostering a healthier ethos in the industry itself. As previously mentioned, competitiveness and scarcity mentalities lead to a toxic working environment; where performers, producers, and other sector employees feel as though they need to overwork and exhaust themselves to carve space for themselves in the landscape (i.e. the “toxic hustle”). The desire for more flexibility, more resources, and more collaboration ties into the projected outlook of the indie arts sector being a space that is inclusive, open, and one that also encourages mental and physical well-being.