

# ACCESSIBILITY MANIFESTO

## Updated March 2021

The Toronto Fringe has made a commitment to establishing and prioritizing accessibility in all areas of our organization.

We are grateful to the Metcalf Foundation for supporting our organization-wide growth with a three-year Creative Strategies Incubator grant, which we began in 2017 and finished in 2020. The grant allowed us to invest meaningful resources into providing, increasing, and improving accessibility at our major events, including the Toronto Fringe Festival and the Next Stage Theatre Festival. We have now completed our time in the Creative Strategies Incubator, but our accessibility work is far from finished.

We created this **Accessibility Manifesto** to communicate what we have done, what we are doing, and what we are planning.

The Accessibility Manifesto serves as a roadmap for us and a commitment to you that we want to be held accountable. This document aids us in being transparent about where we are at in the process and allows you to give us feedback, if you wish. The Manifesto doesn't show every detail but does outline the main aspects of our plans. It is a working document that will be updated regularly.

We appreciate your patience as we do this work and strive to be **accessible in every sense of the word**, as per our organizational values.

This includes, but is not limited to;

- Our Staff
- Our Artists
- Our Patrons
- Our Volunteers
- Our Donors
- Our Sponsors
- Our Partners
- Our Venues
- Our Spaces
- Our Attitude

## **2017-2018**

- Created the new position of Accessibility Coordinator at the Toronto Fringe, hired an Accessibility Coordinator, and engaged an Accessibility Consultant, forging the fundamental structure of this department.
- Created a short-term and long-term work plan (for the next 2 years and beyond)
- Created a comprehensive accessibility handbook for the 2018 Toronto Fringe Festival participants, to be updated and added to with each new festival.
- Created a program to educate and encourage participants to offer assisted measures (ASL Interpretation, Audio Description, Relaxed performances) at their shows.
- Supported artists who opted-in to providing assisted measures for some or all of their performances at the 2018 Fringe Festival.
- Mandated that all site-specific venues be physically accessible.
- Included more information about accessibility on our website and in our program guide.
- Began to overhaul training practices for the departments that engage with patrons and contribute to their Festival experience, including Front of House Managers, Volunteers, and Box Office Representatives.
- Met with consultants from various sectors to discuss ideas and best practices.

## **2018-2019**

- Shifted our accessibility messaging to better reflect our commitment to independence and dignity for patrons with accessibility needs.
- Worked with professional consultants and community members to complete a thorough audit of our main venues at the Fringe and Next Stage Festivals to assess and address barriers to access. As of 2019, the Toronto Fringe uses 16 main venues for our summer festival and one venue, the Factory Theatre, for our winter festival, Next Stage.
- Met with consultants - we discussed learnings, things that worked, and things that definitely need to improve.
- Implemented updates to our website to make it easier to navigate and to offer more access-related content.
- Overhauled the box office experience to significantly improve the accessibility measures we offer our ticket-buying patrons.
- Made modifications to POSTSCRIPT, the Fringe patio, to improve physical accessibility, to make it more welcoming to the Deaf community, and more appealing to folks with neurodiversity and diverse abilities.
- Worked with Deaf Spectrum to create ASL videos with key information about attending and participating in our festivals as an artist, patron, and volunteer.
- Continued to expand and enhance our relationships with service providers (ASL and Deaf interpreters, audio describers, etc.) and community consultants who can be sought out and engaged by Fringe Festival participants.
- Supported artists providing assisted measures for their performances at the Next Stage Theatre Festival.
- Created the new position of Assistant Accessibility Coordinator to help with the expanding access services offered by the Fringe during the Fringe Festival
- More than doubled the number of Assisted Performances offering at the 2019 Fringe Festival from the 2018 Festival.
- Created a text-reader friendly downloadable Assisted Performances Supplement for our Fringe Program Guide to give more information to patrons in choosing performances that meet their needs.

## 2019-2020

- The Accessibility Coordinator role transitioned into the position of Accessibility Manager to better reflect the work and responsibilities being carried.
- The Toronto Fringe moved its administrative office to 100 Broadview Avenue, a physically accessible building located along physically accessible TTC transit routes.
- Worked with Factory Theatre to modify the Studio Theatre to create a more physically accessible space for performers and audiences at the 2020 Next Stage Theatre Festival. A level performance space and audience entrance was offered, allowing all audience members to enter through the same entrance (previously there had been a separate accessible entrance).
- Working with Ophira Calof and the producing team of *Literally Titanium*, we piloted an alternative to traditional relaxed performances, implementing quiet spaces and closed-circuit feed for performances.
- The Next Stage lobby at Factory Theatre was made more welcoming to folks using mobility devices with the introduction of a cleaning station.
- Worked with the main performance venue partners of the Fringe Festival to gather updated accessibility information in anticipation of Fringe 2020 (pre-pandemic) and future in-person festivals.
- Pre-pandemic, reviewed and updated the instructional Accessibility Handbook for Fringe Participants and re-vamped it to a more flexible document that can be shared outside of our organization.
- With the cancellation of the 2020 Toronto Fringe Festival, the Fringe staff and all participants navigated a steep learning curve to transform the festival into the digital Fringe Collective. Pivoting to digital brought up new challenges and learning for accessibility.
- The Fringe Collective provided accessibility more broadly to all of our audiences by establishing mandatory minimum standards of accessibility and offering support to Fringe participants in order to meet these requirements. Everyone participating in this festival learned about online accessibility to varying degrees. Fringe participants were required to offer the following access provisions:
  - Captions for videos
  - Audio accompanied by full transcripts
  - Alternative descriptions for all images
  - Screen-reader friendly text documents
- Welcomed our first Deaf participant into TENT 2020, providing full ASL coverage for the program.
- Welcomed our first Deaf-led community partner, Deaf Spirit Theatre, as participants in the Fringe Collective.
- Hosted a feedback session with Deaf stakeholders in our community.
- Created instructional documents for making online arts programming more accessible (creating screen-reader friendly documents, captioning for video). The living documents were available to Fringe Collective participants and staff and can be adapted for use throughout the arts sector and beyond.
- Enhanced the accessibility of our social media communications, and began a protocol document for Fringe social media platforms.

- Hosted an online Audio Described Listening Party of Fringe Collective offerings with Blind host, Christine Malec, and audio describer, Kat Germain, in response to wants voiced by Blind and partially sighted community.
- Collaborated with Phoenix the fire and Teklawatheta, both new Deaf-led BIPOC service providers, to present a Deaf Interpreted Kidsfest Story Hour during our Fringe Collective live streamed programming series in July.
- Provided live-captioning and ASL interpretation at all 5 livestreamed POSTSCRIPT events.
- Implemented self-description protocol for Fringe staff and presenters for live and recorded events.
- Began document outlining accessibility protocols for online workshops, seminars, etc., to inform any future digital programming.
- Continued providing promo vlogs in ASL created and distributed by Sage Lovell at Deaf Spectrum. Vlog also created and distributed to promote the Kidsfest ASL Story Hour by event collaborator Phoenix the Fire.
- Provided an Accessible Program Guide supplement for the Fringe Collective.

## **2020-2021**

- In September 2020, we completed the three-year Creative Strategies Incubator grant from the Metcalf Foundation. However, our accessibility work does not stop with the end to this funding.
- We are actively seeking new funding to support our accessibility commitments, including individual donor support as well as grants and corporate sponsorship.
- Also in September 2020, the Toronto Fringe began an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Audit with Where You Are Consulting. A summary of the results of the audit will be available on our website in Spring 2021.
- Due to the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic, we hosted the Next Stage Community Booster in January 2021 as a digital event to replace what would have been our 13<sup>th</sup> annual Next Stage Theatre Festival.
- Building on our work on accessibility in digital spaces from the Fringe Collective, the Community Booster featured digital theatrical and storytelling performances, as well as workshops, panels, and a micro-conference, all with accessibility measures in place:
  - Captions for videos
  - Auto-transcribed captions for live events
  - Full transcripts for all video and audio pieces
  - Alternative descriptions for all images
  - Screen-reader friendly text documents
  - ASL interpretation for all public, livestreamed events
- Planning for the Digital Toronto Fringe Festival, scheduled for July 2021, is underway and again will build on the learnings from the Fringe Collective and Next Stage Community Booster. All participants in the Digital Fringe will be required to present a minimum level accessibility measures, and will be given support and resources to achieve this.

## **ON-GOING WORK**

- Partnering with Disability-led organizations to present the work of Mad, Deaf, and Disability-identified artists in our festivals and on our patio.
- Working with like-minded organizations to improve the distribution of information about accessible performances and opportunities for artists who are Deaf, Mad, and those with disabilities throughout Ontario.
- Sharing our learnings with organizations just beginning the journey to better accessibility. We have been approached by multiple organizations with regards to accessibility to ask about our processes and best practices, we will continue to offer our knowledge to ensure that more and more companies are doing this work.
- Tracking and reviewing our initiatives to assess impact.
- Refining the use of our language around what an 'accessible' venue means, recognizing we have been talking more specifically about patrons, rather than artists and technicians where there are still many barriers in many theatres.
- Revisiting best practices around language for accessibility.
- Continuing to research and implement more inclusive accessibility measures in digital interactions and events.
- Creating more opportunities for people with disabilities, Deaf, and Mad individuals to get involved with our organization in all capacities.
- Creating and implementing a project plan for Accessibility Focus Groups. AFGs will be comprised of people with lived experience and consulted regularly throughout the year. AFG activity will include identifying any barriers to participation in the Fringe, brainstorming future-forward ideas for increased inclusion of Mad, Deaf, and Disability-identified people, and offering feedback on Fringe events.
- Improving accessibility for our participants.

## **WHAT'S COMING NEXT**

- Working with like-minded organizations provincially to advocate for increased funding for organizations and artists to increase accessible offerings for audiences and provide more opportunities to work with Mad, Deaf, and Disability-identified artists, producers, technicians, etc.
- Partnering with organizations like Creative Users to program a day of presentations and workshops.
- Engaging in outreach to disability support organizations throughout Ontario to foster awareness of the accessible offerings at the 2021 Fringe and all our future programming

## **FUTURE PLANS**

- Creating a set of functional illustrated ASL cards with a local Deaf artist to better enable our non-signing staff to communicate with Deaf patrons.
- Work with professional consultants and past Fringe participants to complete a thorough audit of the backstage areas of our main venues to assess and address barriers to access for Fringe participants and technicians.
- Incorporate LSQ performances in addition to ASL in our festivals.
- Compiling a list of universally accessible venues for potential site-specific participants to use when applying to the Toronto Fringe Festival for 2022

- Using the data gathered in the venue audits in 2019/20, we will be creating two online documents for each of our main venues to provide more accurate and comprehensive information about accessibility to anyone that wishes: Visual Venue Guides and Venue Accessibility Information.
- Improving Visual Venue Guide and Venue Accessibility Information templates for our site-specific participants to use to provide patrons with more comprehensive information.