

Next Stage Community Booster Wraps After Providing a Platform for Vital Community Dialogue and Investing in New Work from Indie Artists

Pre-recorded digital performances received 1,500+ views, Live Digital Events welcomed 1,000+ audience members, Zoom fundraising event saw 100+ households in attendance, Micro-Conference hosted 50+ attendees.

February 4, 2021 (Toronto, ON) The Next Stage Community Booster, which replaced the 14th annual Next Stage Theatre Festival, wrapped up last weekend. **This four-day event was a boost of energy, ideas, creativity, and friendship for those enduring an isolated pandemic winter.** The event featured digital performances from acclaimed indie artists, a half-day conference for the indie theatre community, livestreamed conversations on urgent topics, a special interactive fundraiser event, a digital Self-Care Hub, and audio experiences.

After pivoting to this fully online offering back in the fall, the staff and board of the Toronto Fringe sent out a survey to its community to assess how to best use its typical January platform. The response was twofold: the indie arts community wanted **clarity on the current state of the industry** and **connection with their peers**.

Programming for the Next Stage Community Booster reflected these two priorities, alongside another key objective for the organization, which is to offer a platform for diverse voices and support art made by BIPOC indie artists. Toronto Fringe is currently in process with Where You Are Consulting who are completing an **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Audit**. The final report will be shared in March 2021, and the initial findings were presented at the Community Booster. Further details below.

Toronto Fringe is proud to have paid over 100 artists for their work in this festival. All artists in the TO Live Theatre Shorts series, Storytelling with Steam Whistle series, and Audio Offerings series were paid a commission. The hosts, panelists, instructors, and performers that contributed to the Self-Care Hub and the Live Digital Events were paid for their expertise and engagement.

The digital theatre pieces that premiered at the Next Stage Community Booster would not have been possible without the collaboration of [Steam Whistle Brewing](#) and [TO Live](#). These two long-time partners were not willing to let their commitment to indie theatre be stopped by the pandemic, and stepped up to help the Toronto Fringe support artists in these difficult times. Their support is greatly appreciated.

The Community Booster's digital performance packages welcomed 1,500+ viewers onto fringetoronto.com to see the nimble and innovative ways that indie theatre artists have pivoted into the digital sphere. Viewers commented on the wide-range of offerings, and the surprising hidden gems found in these digital packages.

What Audiences Had to Say (Twitter)

- "The storytelling is stunning. The audio offerings are profound."
@rob_kempson (Rob Kempson, local writer and director)
- "Theatre Shorts are really good!"
@rndyounghowze (Ricky and Dana Young-Howze, theatre reviewing team from the US)

- “So many good things to watch and listen to!”
@bonmoxie (Bonnie Anderson, local filmmaker)
- “I have enjoyed the online Fringe shows much more than I ever expected!”
@LindsayFoley19 (Lindsay Foley, local audience member)
- “I was having so much fun. What a great show. Morro and Jasp rocked it!”
@LyndaDelGrande (Lynda Del Grande, local audience member)

Should I Stay or Should I Go?: A Micro-Conference for the Indie Arts Sector

This Micro-Conference welcomed over 50 participants into a Zoom conversation. Co-hosted by Ryerson University’s Creative Innovation Studio at FCAD, this half-day, free conference invited participants to share their perspective on the past, present, and future of the indie arts sector. Many indie artists in attendance are contemplating a career shift, as they are not seeing a path forward in a pandemic and post-pandemic era. This was the focus of the conversation.

Key questions from participants:

- “Will artists be too exhausted to continue?”
- “Will the climate crisis become a more pressing issue than making art?”
- “Will we forget about all the conversations we’ve had about inclusion?”
- “Will theatre become irrelevant?”
- “Will I be able to afford to continue?”
- “Will Toronto no longer have an active downtown core?”
- “Will I find other work and not want to return?”

Several in attendance also talked about the fact that, due to CERB, they were the most financially secure they have been in many years. Participants advocated for future financial and mental health support for the artists that keep this industry thriving. They argued that, if we are to go back to theatre as it was in Toronto, we need to do more to centre the people who make the art. Fringe supports this advocacy, and will continue to be the voice for the indie theatre artists in the difficult years ahead.

Toronto Fringe is working with the team at Ryerson University to move this conversation forward, and will be announcing follow up conversations in the coming months. Please stay tuned for details.

A Fringe Fundraiser: Bake Your Heart Out with Morro & Jasp

Bake Your Heart Out with Morro & Jasp welcomed over 100 households into the Fringe’s Zoom room on Saturday, January 23. Clown sisters Morro (Heather Marie Annis) & Jasp (the 9-month pregnant Amy Lee) hosted a baking show to help beat their lockdown blues. Certain members of the audience had an ingredients package delivered to their homes in advance, and these folks were invited into the Zoom space to participate in this baking class with the clown sisters. These participatory moments had many people commenting on how similar the experience was to live theatre. There were many belly laughs, a great deal of mess, and a joyful amount of conversation in the Zoom chat.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Audit

On Sunday, January 24, consultants Sedina Fiati and Candice Frederick of Where You Are Consulting presented the first part of an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion report on the Toronto Fringe. This presentation was streamed on Facebook Live to hundreds of viewers. After the presentation, members of the community were invited into the Zoom room to reflect and share their perspectives. The consultants moderated a lively and thoughtful conversation, which will feed into the final draft of the report. The full EDI report will be released in early March 2021. [View EDI Town Hall video here.](#)

The Self-Care Hub – Now Extended!

Alongside our ticketed performance offerings, the Next Stage Community Booster featured a digital Self-Care Hub on fringetoronto.com. Patrons could access this portal with a tip to the Toronto Fringe at the level they were comfortable with. Fringe wanted to ensure the hub was financially accessible to those (particularly artists) struggling to make ends meet this year.

Just announced: The Toronto Fringe will be extending the Self-Care Hub as an ongoing online offering. These interactive classes, workshops, and resources will be accessible for a modest tip (\$0 is fine as well) throughout the spring. Look for new resources to be added soon!

Alongside the Self-Care Hub, Fringe will be archiving the Live Digital Events and conversations that took place during the Community Booster. This new **Community Hub** is a one-stop-shop for members of the indie arts community looking for information and resources on the future of theatre.

[Access the Community Hub here.](#)

What's Next for Fringe?

Look out for a few special application opportunities this spring, such as the 24 Hour Playwriting Contest. And stay tuned for details about the summer Fringe Festival in July 2021. Rest assured that the staff and board of the Toronto Fringe are working as hard as possible to plan the safest, most joyful, most welcoming, and inclusive event of the summer. Stay tuned!

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