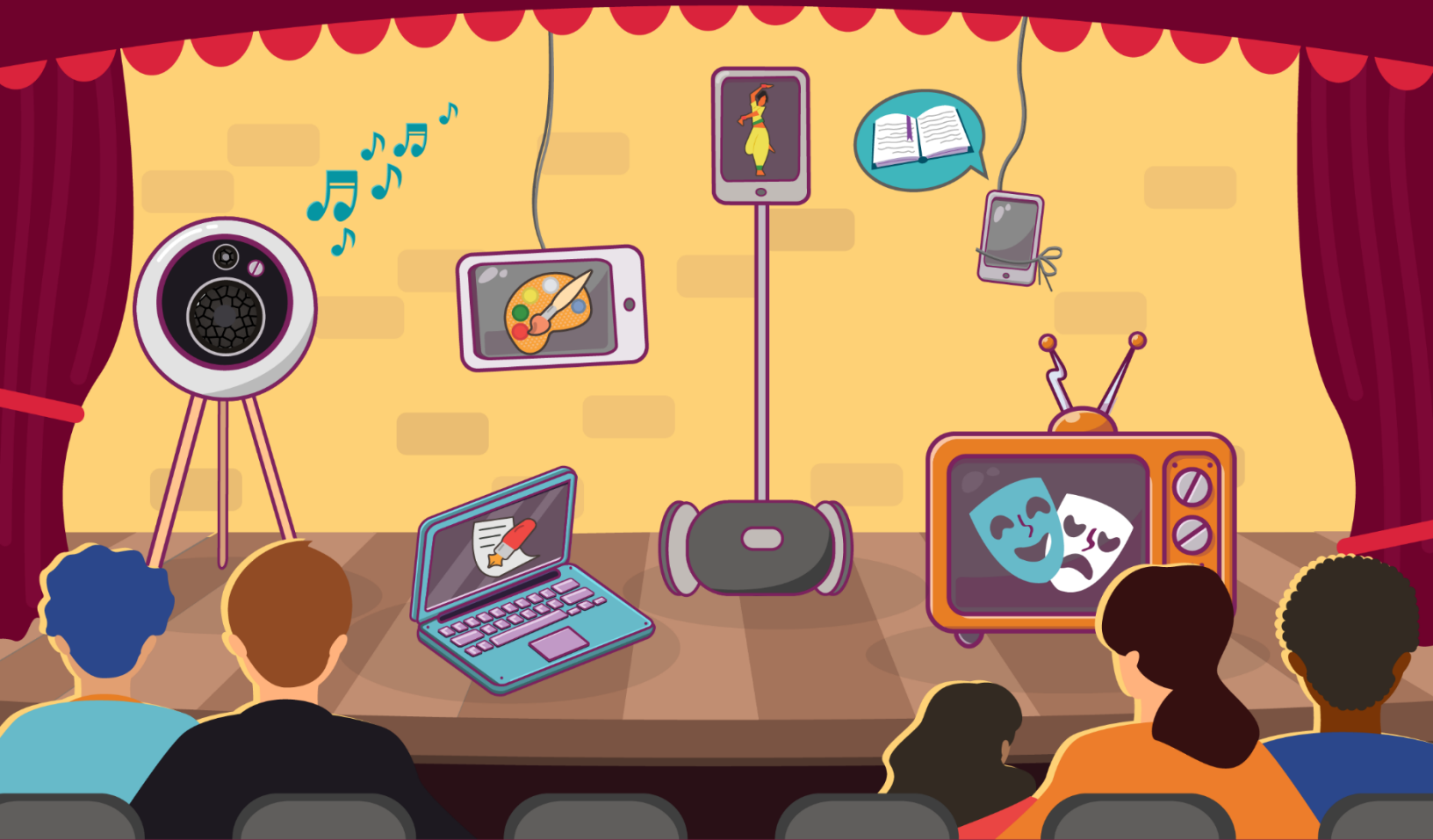


# Innovation and resilience in the arts, culture, and heritage in Canada



## Insights from 29 stories of artists and organizations using innovation to find resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic

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### PROJECT FUNDER

Funded by the  
Government  
of Canada

Financé par le  
gouvernement  
du Canada

Canada

February 2022

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# Introduction

Many artists and organizations in the arts, culture, and heritage have responded and adapted to pandemic-induced challenges by doing new things or doing things in new ways. *Innovation and resilience in the arts, culture, and heritage in Canada* offers 29 stories of artists and organizations using innovation to find resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic, while an accompanying webpage contains a much longer (but still limited) list of innovations and pivots.

A recent report shows that the 594,000 employment and self-employment positions in the culture sector in 2020 represented the lowest jobs total since culture specific records began in 2010. The total value of all goods and services sold in the culture sector decreased by 10% between 2019 and 2020, reaching its lowest level since 2015. The performing arts and festivals have been the hardest hit area of the culture sector, losing 36% of jobs and 52% of sales between 2019 and 2020.

Alongside these pandemic-induced changes, many other significant events have taken place. The discovery of unmarked graves on former residential school sites, the intensification of the fight for racial justice, increased anti-Asian racism, and the premeditated murder of a Muslim family: all have shaped our country and the arts and heritage sector.

The artists and organizations profiled in this report actively sought out changes and innovations that provided a measure of stability in turbulent times, whether that stability involved interesting new directions, significant personal opportunities, promoting diverse voices, combatting racism, limiting staff layoffs, or increasing revenues.

Some of the artists and organizations responded to our survey of the cultural community between May and July 2021. Others were nominated by members of our research team and the Creative City Network of Canada's Steering Committee for this project. All 29 stories were discussed and selected by [the fantastic team of "Story Seekers" assembled to work on this project](#). In selecting which stories to pursue, our team attempted to balance a number of considerations:

- Geography: There are stories from all 10 provinces and two territories, from urban, suburban, rural, regional, and Indigenous communities.
- Diversity: There are stories about Indigenous organizations; Black-led organizations; 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations; official language minority organizations; groups led by women; organizations working with people who are D/deaf, disabled, or live with difference; and racialized artists.
- Disciplines: There are stories about artists and organizations working in many different arts and heritage disciplines.
- Size and type: The stories profile the work of individual artists, groups of various sizes and structures, as well as younger and more established organizations.



Our thanks go out to the artists and organizational representatives who agreed to be interviewed for this study and have their stories of innovation and resilience presented in this report:

[Afros In Tha City](#)

(Calgary, Alberta)

[ALAVIVA](#)

(Quebec City, Quebec)

[Alianait Festival](#)

(Iqaluit, Nunavut)

[BEING Studio](#)

(Ottawa, Ontario)

[Carving on the Edge Festival](#)

(Tofino, British Columbia)

[Dancemakers and Luke Garwood](#)

(Toronto, Ontario)

[Enza Apa and artsPlace Canmore](#)

(Canmore, Alberta)

[Eastern Front Theatre](#)

(Dartmouth, Nova Scotia)

[Festival of Literary Diversity](#)

(Brampton, Ontario)

[Fredericton Playhouse](#)

(Fredericton, New Brunswick)

[Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance](#)

(Toronto base but national in scope)

[Kiran Ambwani](#)

(Montreal, Quebec)

[Laïla Mestari](#)

(Chicoutimi & Montreal, Quebec)

[Musée d'art de Rouyn-Noranda](#)

(Rouyn-Noranda, Quebec)

[Newfoundland Symphony Orchestra](#)

(St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador)

[Okanagan Children's Choir](#)

(Okanagan, British Columbia)

[Orchestre symphonique de Montréal](#)

(Montreal, Quebec)

[Prince Edward Island Department of Education](#)

(Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island)

[Queer Songbook Orchestra](#)

(Toronto, Ontario)

[re:Naissance Opera](#)

(Vancouver, British Columbia)

[rice & beans theatre](#)

(Vancouver, British Columbia)

[STEPS Public Art](#)

(Toronto, Ontario)

[Strata Festival of New Music](#)

(Saskatoon, Saskatchewan)

[Tangled Art + Disability](#)

(Toronto, Ontario)

[Théâtre Cercle Molière](#)

(Winnipeg, Manitoba)

[Tupiq A.C.T. \(Arctic Circus Troupe\)](#)

(Kuujuuaq & Montreal, Quebec)

[Video Pool Media Arts Centre](#)

(Winnipeg, Manitoba)

[Woodland Cultural Centre](#)

(Six Nations, Ontario)

[Yukon Transportation Museum](#)

(Whitehorse, Yukon)

## 12 key themes

We discovered 12 interrelated themes in the stories. Details are provided [in the themes section](#).

1. **Innovation works best when customized:** Though innovation often involves technology, many of the stories involved changes in organizational processes. Some innovations were both technology and process based.
2. **Needed: flexibility and adaptability:** Flexibility and adaptability of mindset, objectives, and resource allocation were key ingredients for innovation and resilience.
3. **Support is varied but crucial:** Whether through financial or in-kind support, every innovation relied on staff, collaborators, and a range of funders to pitch in.
4. **Digital, organizational, and financial challenges:** All innovations faced incredible challenges during the pandemic. Artists, arts managers, and heritage workers overcame key digital, organizational, and financial barriers in implementing changes.
5. **Small can be mighty:** Many innovative ideas got off the ground with very few resources, and some of the smallest organizations were able to be very nimble.
6. **Partnerships can extend capacity and reach:** For many innovators, partnerships were essential to their resilience.
7. **Equity bolsters resilience, and resilience enhances equity:** The hard work of creating equity can contribute to resilience, which, in turn, influences equity.
8. **Sometimes, just jump:** The organizations and artists who responded particularly well identified opportunities and, in many cases, took a big leap of faith.
9. **Prioritizing and connecting with artists:** A common theme among organizations and artists who had success during the pandemic was that they prioritized the community's artists and developed new projects according to artists' ideas and needs.
10. **Short-term innovations can lead to longer-term changes:** Most pandemic-related innovations were focused on short-term goals such as creating works and employing artists, but a number of artists and organizations also turned their attention to long-term applications of their innovations.
11. **Important places of exchange:** Artists and cultural organizations are often at the forefront of engaging in dialogues about the compelling histories, stories, issues, and ideas that exist in every community.
12. **Redefining the arts and heritage:** Some pandemic innovations have pushed the boundaries of artforms or of the presentation of gallery and museum collections.

## About the project

*Innovation and resilience in the arts, culture, and heritage* is a multi-year project of The Creative City Network of Canada in partnership with the Cultural Human Resources Council, Les Arts et la Ville, and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. Representatives from each of the partner organizations came together to form a Steering Committee to guide the research.

Hill Strategies led the research for the first phase of this project, while its second phase involves professional development to transmit key learnings to other cultural organizations and artists, with the goal of building resilience within the arts and heritage sector.

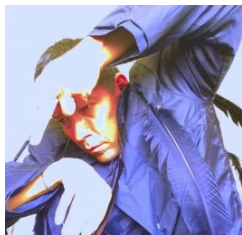
For the research phase, Kelly Hill (Hamilton, ON) worked with a talented and diverse team of Story Seekers who identified and wrote stories of innovation during the pandemic: Anju Singh (Vancouver, BC), Blanche Israël (Halifax, NS, who also contributed to project coordination and story analysis), JP Longboat (Ottawa, ON), Margaret Lam (Kitchener, ON), Melanie Fernandez (Toronto, ON), and Myriam Benzakour-Durand (Montreal, QC).



**Anju Singh** is a multidisciplinary artist and consultant based in Vancouver, BC with over 15 years of experience in leadership, technical, and administrative roles in the not-for-profit and arts sectors. Anju specializes in the areas of technology, media arts, systems change work, project management, and digital transformation.



**Blanche Israël** is a multilingual Canadian consultant, cellist, and the founder of proScenium Services, which specializes in strategy, development, and virtualizing in the performing arts. During the pandemic, Blanche launched a livestream technician service for Canadian artists and arts organizations. Consulting clients have included Dadan Sivunivut, the Canadian Opera Company, The Arts Firm, and Orchestras Canada. Blanche completed a degree in Arts Management at the University of Toronto in 2014. She has performed and toured as a cellist with JUNO Award-winning Indigenous operatic tenor and composer Jeremy Dutcher since 2018.



**JP Longboat** is a storyteller and multidisciplinary artist. He is Kanyen'kehà:ka (Mohawk), Turtle Clan and grew up along the River Ouse, Haldimand Deed territory, Ontario. JP has a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree through combined education at the University of Michigan and the Ontario College of Art and Design. He has extensive professional training and practice in traditional and contemporary forms of visual art and live performance. JP has trained, collaborated, and performed with many professional theatre and dance companies across Canada. His work emanates from the cultural ways of his people and his creative process is grounded in the legacy of First Nations artistic practice. He is the founder and Associate Director of Circadia Indigena-

Indigenous Arts Collective based in Algonquin territory, along the Kichi Sibi at Akikodjiwan Falls. The collective creates full-length performance works and land-based multidisciplinary festivals.



**Kelly Hill** is the President of Hill Strategies Research, which specializes in research related to Canada's arts and heritage sector. Kelly has a unique perspective on the arts and heritage thanks to the 400+ research projects that he has undertaken since founding Hill Strategies in 2002, including qualitative and quantitative research into various arts and heritage disciplines. He has a strong interest in projects that illuminate the well-being of artists and arts organizations across Canada.

**Margaret Lam** is the Design Research Lead at Octagram, a software consultancy in Canada. She consults and advises on numerous strategic digital initiatives, where she brings a nuanced understanding of how human-centered design practices can inform social innovation and digital transformation within the arts and culture sector. Select projects include CAPACOA's Linked Digital Future Initiative, Creative Users' Accessing the Arts, ArtsPond's Hatch Open and ThePitch.ca. She is also the founder of BeMused Network and the co-founder of DigitalASO.



**Melanie Fernandez** has over 25 years of leadership experience in the arts and cultural sectors with a focus on exploring innovative frameworks for producing and learning through community-engaged intersectional practices. Melanie's work is rooted in inclusionary platforms that ensure postcolonial representation of racialized and Indigenous stories. Currently, Melanie is the Coordinator of the Arts Education & Community Engagement at Centennial College, is the Project Manager for the final phase of restoration of the Mohawk Institute Residential School site, and consults. Consulting clients have included Mural Routes, Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance, Ukrainian Culture Festival, Living Arts Centre in Mississauga, Lifeline Syria, the British Museum, the Woodland Cultural Centre, North York Board of Education and others.



**Myriam Benzakour-Durand** has professional experience with various arts organizations, as well as in community engagement and community arts in Montreal. Having completed a master's degree in management, she has specialized in understanding conflictual relationships within social services, the arts, and non-traditional management structures. Her academic and professional background has allowed her to put to good use her ease in human relations, her ability to understand the needs and strengths of each person, and her capacity to find creative and innovative solutions.

## Themes

### 1. Innovation works best when customized

Each artist and organization defined and delivered innovation differently, based on their own knowledge and experience. Success can also look different for different innovations.

Many used technology to create and present works in a virtual setting, others changed their creative and organizational processes to meet changing needs, and some did a mix of the two. In all innovations, a key finding was that it is critical to start with a deep understanding of your specific audiences' values, habits, and level of digital literacy, and to then incorporate them in the design of audience experiences.

#### Technological innovations

In some cases, responding to pandemic restrictions required organizations and artists to digitize their programming in order to continue to connect with their communities virtually. Most technological innovations were relatively simple, relying on existing and established tools such as videography, photography, and social media, as well as commonly used platforms such as Zoom and YouTube. Digital innovations are far from one-size-fits-all, and a key lesson is that innovators should be mindful of the urban-centric and Western-centric nature of digital “best practices”.

**Debi Wong**  
re:Naissance Opera



*[In] creating an interactive 360° experience, we have to really be in tune with what we think [audiences] are going to do, or how we think they're going to engage with the piece, so that they don't get lost in an endless VR world, or they don't get confused and bored and just quit, or they can still understand the story. Because they have agency in the story.*

- The **Festival of Literary Diversity** moved all its events to Zoom in May 2020, and by 2021 had developed a sophisticated literary festival experience hosted on a highly customizable conference software platform called vFairs.
- The **Strata Festival of New Music** created an online composing symposium in a month, without prior experience in creating digital experiences.
- The choral arts were strongly affected by health regulations, which closed down all in-person singing events. In this context, the **Okanagan Children's Choir** created a digital composition project to allow choir members to get together, create music, and sing.
- Unable to travel from Montreal to Nunavik to perform, the **Tupiq Arctic Circus Troupe** learned to create and perform for film under tight restrictions in order to deliver on its obligations and maintain a presence in its Northern community.
- Yellow Objects, by **rice & beans theatre**, adapted from live theatre to an installation format to create “a version of this project that can be done without live actors, while still

keeping a semi-interactive storytelling experience,” according to Artistic Director Derek Chan. The artists worked with digital tools that allowed them to sketch out the performance space, test lighting and projections, place actor-figures in the space, and run projections.

- **ALAVIVA**, an organization that aims to promote the social inclusion of seniors and people with reduced mobility through technology, used a robot to help connect seniors to art during the pandemic. The robot offered a remote virtual tour to seniors who were stuck in their homes. Early iterations demonstrated the great potential of the project, which propelled ALAVIVA to make the “art robot” a pillar of the organization.

## Process innovations

We found that some of the most innovative approaches did not require groundbreaking technology, but instead focused on a reimagining of artists’ and organizations’ creative and logistical approaches and processes. Changes involved programming, staff, structure, and resource allocation.



*What we did was not rocket science. We used YouTube; we used our website. Really I feel like the biggest innovation was the process - the way we delivered it. We worked hard to make it feel like you were ‘doing symphony’: making the digital concert experience mimic the feel of a live concert through elements like pre-show chats, audience interaction, and a signature cocktail.*

**Hugh Donnan**  
Newfoundland  
Symphony Orchestra

- The stability afforded through emergency funding from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Winnipeg Foundation, and federal emergency programs allowed **Video Pool Media Arts Centre** to shift its resources toward its process innovations. The act of slowing down to make intentional, thoughtful, and consulted decisions meant that the organization could build for the future with everyone in mind.
- Artist **Leila Mestari** worked with the LOBE Centre in Chicoutimi to bring a gallery experience outdoors through soundless video installations designed for viewing through a window, works displayed on advertisement billboards, and a printed zine for on-site and international distribution.
- The **Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance** developed Tech Bundles — shippable equipment and software for use by remote and Northern Indigenous communities — as a pandemic-adapted alternative to a Northern touring network project. When the organization realized that its remote partners needed support, not just equipment, other partners were brought on to create workshops and tutorials to accompany the Tech Bundles.
- The **Newfoundland Symphony** focused its outreach efforts on remote parts of the province it had never reached in its nearly 50-year history. The organization now has plans to change its name to the Newfoundland and Labrador Symphony as a result of the

geographical reach it was able to develop through the digital innovations brought on by the pandemic.

- The **Queer Songbook Orchestra**'s major pandemic innovation was to work with schools for the first time. QSO Kids, a digital show for elementary school students, required the organization to learn how to livestream while navigating school requests and requirements.



## 2. Needed: flexibility and adaptability

Flexibility is a key precondition for innovation and resilience. In other words, openness to change is fundamental. During the pandemic, increased flexibility around organizations' usual obligations created an excellent breeding ground for innovation. A culture of openness to small experiments and a commitment to learning from those experiences helped artists and organizations become more resilient. Our research found that many different sources of flexibility played a role in resilience, including staff, volunteers, organizational structures, artistic output, and funding.

### Staff and volunteers

Resources, particularly staff time, are needed to help organizations respond nimbly. Having a staff member or outside contractor dedicated to digital efforts was instrumental to many organizations' responsiveness. For others, digital initiatives required a team and infrastructure distinct from bricks-and-mortar operations.

- Like many other Canadians, members of **Afros In Tha City's** media collective experienced the negative mental health effects of isolation during the pandemic. In response to this, the collective showed flexibility toward its members regarding schedules and deadlines, which helped the collective with its sustainability through the pandemic.
- In order to deliver a digital version of its theatre creation festival for youth, staff at **Théâtre Cercle Molière** learned many new technologies, including livestreaming its annual gala.
- Staff flexibility and organizational support run in both directions. For the **Orchestre symphonique de Montréal**, the team's comfort, health, and psychological well-being were at the heart of the decision-making process. Several initiatives were taken to support the teams, including group walks and a network of phone calls. Having received this support on a human level, employees were fully invested and able to pivot. The team quickly developed expertise in human resources, digital skills, programming and finances to allow the orchestra to continue to perform.
- In delivering a digital festival, the **Carving on the Edge Festival** required different skills from its volunteers, especially technological literacy and experience, which led to recruitment challenges that the festival was eventually able to overcome.

**Barbara Beranek**  
Musée d'art de  
Rouyn-Noranda



*COVID forced us to think outside the box and think fast.*



## Organizational adaptation

Some organizations refined their organizational structure to respond to changing circumstances.

- The **Queer Songbook Orchestra**, which had operated as an unincorporated collective before the pandemic, had very little infrastructure to rely on. The organization had to go dark for many months. To envision a new, more resilient path forward, the collective incorporated as a not-for-profit, building infrastructure that would allow them to work with schools, secure larger grants, and work toward increased sustainability.
- The social enterprise model of **STEPS Public Art** enabled the organization to remain nimble and responsive and to identify innovative opportunities when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. The staff team structures enabled STEPS to facilitate projects through a tight project management process to maximize output while allowing staff to have ownership over projects.
- Careful reflection about digital practices can help organizations adapt to changing needs, as shown by the digital transition of the **Carving on the Edge Festival**. The festival took the time to think about the “why” behind its digital approaches, including how these approaches align with the community’s values.



*An orchestra is like a football or hockey team. If they don't play together on a regular basis, the team won't be as good.*

**Marianne Perron**  
Orchestre Symphonique  
de Montréal

## Artistic output

- **Kiran Ambwani** demonstrated flexibility and the ability to adapt on several occasions. She developed a new work method—a collaborative approach—that she was able to add to her toolbox. She also adapted to a new kind of visual aesthetics in her photography.
- Similarly, **Laïla Mestari** maintained a flexible artistic practice, relying on multiple media to execute her *Hay Girl* project, which was extremely well adapted to the exceptional circumstances of COVID-19.
- When delivery of arts-based curriculum became incredibly difficult, alternatives that supported remote learning became a valuable source of mental health support for students. The **PEI Student Drama Festival** was revamped as a digital experience to give students the opportunity to write their own scripts and participate in artist-led workshops on topics such as blocking, lighting design, choreography, costume design, makeup, and scriptwriting.
- For **ALAVIVA**, it was important to quickly test new ideas related to its “art robot”. This process, which Founder Andrée Pelletier refers to as open innovation or design thinking, helped the organization identify needs, validate those ideas, test a prototype, and improve the product.

## Funding

Flexible funding support, along with the elimination of some pre-pandemic expenditures (e.g., travel, accommodations, and front-of-house costs), allowed organizations to focus on paying creative people to brainstorm new ideas, models, and solutions.

- For Paul Suchan, Executive Director of the **Strata Festival of New Music**, funding flexibility “really opens up the world for innovation”. On the expenses side, the virtual edition of the Student Composer Symposium had lower costs for travel, distribution, and marketing.
- The speedy flexibility of the **Festival of Literary Diversity** allowed the organization to hold onto previously approved grants while achieving its goals through virtual events.

**Shaun Brodie**  
Queer Songbook  
Orchestra

“

*[Resilience is about] being able to find the opportunity when things don't go as you planned, but then being able to look at it from a different perspective and see what can be made of where you are at.*

### 3. Support is varied but crucial

No innovator worked alone. Support came from a range of sources in myriad ways, not all of which were financial. Every innovator relied on staff, collaborators, and funders to pitch in. Non-financial contributions included gifts of time and expertise.

#### Mixed funding sources, usually with governments in the mix

Organizations explored many avenues to improve their financial situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, including generating earned revenues, encouraging donations, and reducing expenses.

- When in-person educational and public visits to the **Woodland Cultural Centre** became non-existent, the impact on revenue streams was huge. The development and packaging of the Centre's virtual tour more than tripled the educational program's generated revenues.
- The **Orchestre symphonique de Montréal**, which had previously offered its digital concerts free of charge, moved to a paid model by enriching its programming with bonus content.
- For many groups, community support was a necessary ingredient for resilience. For example, the **Fredericton Playhouse** and the **Orchestre symphonique de Montréal** retained ticket revenues by asking ticket buyers to consider converting their tickets into donations. In other cases, targeted fundraising campaigns were successful thanks to this same type of public goodwill.

**Marianne Perron**  
Orchestre Symphonique  
de Montréal



*We cancelled so many concerts, and people could choose to be reimbursed for the cost of the tickets, receive a credit to use when we resumed our activities, or make a donation. The percentage of people who made a donation was enormous.*

Government funding played a role in almost all cases. During the pandemic, many municipal, provincial, and federal agencies prioritized stability and employment, affording organizations an unprecedented opportunity to experiment and innovate.

Here are examples of how innovators generated and worked with different types of funding.

- **STEPS Public Art** scaled up its innovation thanks to municipal support from the City of Toronto, RBC, 27 business improvement areas across Ontario, and other supporters.
- The Town of Canmore's Building Neighbourhoods Project supported the Curbside Museum project of artist **Enza Apa** and **artsPlace Canmore**. The Curbside Museum, which started as a small personal project outside Enza's home, grew into a larger community-engaged project supported by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts' Travelling Exhibition Program.

- The **Strata Festival of New Music** in Saskatchewan benefited from sustained operating funding from SK Arts, which was later extended by an additional year.
- The **Yukon Transportation Museum** received financial support for its pilot initiative from the City of Whitehorse, the Government of Yukon, and local businesses such as Air North, Pelly Construction, and Lotteries Yukon.
- The **Alienait Arts Festival** made some financial adjustments with the support of its funders including the Government of Nunavut, the Government of Canada, and Canadian North Airlines, and reexamined its existing grants, reprioritizing and contextualizing some of its funding to take on a new festival delivery format.
- **BEING Studio**'s Artist Connect project was a large undertaking, including direct costs such as speaker fees for special guests and artists, plus administrative overhead. The project's funders included the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ottawa Community Foundation, and individual donors also provided crucial support.
- **Video Pool** received emergency COVID-19 funding from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Winnipeg Foundation, as well as support from the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy. This meant that the organization had the financial resources and the staff capacity to pursue organizational process innovations.
- The **Carving on the Edge Festival** shifted to a digital edition in 2021, despite the challenges in doing so for wood carving — a very hands-on artform. The festival was supported by a variety of funders, such as BC Arts Council, Department of Canadian Heritage, Clayoquot Biosphere Trust, Destination BC Tourism Events Program, Alberni Clayoquot Regional District, and Tourism Tofino. The reduced costs of the online version allowed the festival to be delivered with a budget that was about 20% smaller than in previous years.

## New revenue streams

Some groups created brand new revenue streams, but not all saw expanded budgets overall. In some cases, the new revenue streams simply replaced revenues lost due to the pandemic.

- The **Newfoundland Symphony** created Pay-It-Forward subscriptions, a targeted donation that subscribers could add to their digital subscription to give the less fortunate access to the symphony.
- **rice & beans theatre** created interactive stories and an online installation for its Yellow Objects project, which expanded the company's audience and led to some financial stability.
- The digital edition of the **Carving on the Edge Festival** generated roughly three times as much in fundraising as the festival had received in previous years. The fundraising success in 2021 was thanks to registrants being redirected to a donation page right after completing their online registration.
- Galleries and museums such as the **Woodland Cultural Centre** and the **Musée d'art de Rouyn-Noranda** created virtual tours and galleries that visitors could explore online, serving their communities while also reaching new demographic and geographical segments and creating a new revenue stream.

## 4. Digital, organizational, and financial challenges

Three types of management challenges were very common in implementing the innovations: digital skills, organizational capacity, and finances. A few examples:

### Digital

- Many artists and cultural presenters who performed at the **Alienait Arts Festival** had no experience recording themselves. The festival offered them significant assistance in preparing for and delivering their online presentations.
- The switch from live performance to film was complex for **Tupiq Arctic Circus Troupe**, involving learning about film production from scratch. Despite the lack of experience, the company's artists and administrators chose to lean into the pivot to film as an opportunity to showcase their creativity.
- Organizers of the **Festival of Literary Diversity** learned how to manage Zoom events as they quickly adapted to a digital space in 2020, but that left them vulnerable to online trolling and socially disruptive behaviours. Minimizing safety concerns was a critical issue that the festival addressed by moving to a new, paid platform in 2021.

### Organizational

- An artist residency at **Dancemakers** occurred at a unique time, because the organization had been without artistic leadership for about a year and had been scheduled to close. A new Board took over, but the timing of the organizational change caused uncertainty and delays in the residency.
- **Video Pool** was able to manage its intensive processes to improve accessibility and transform the organization during the pandemic, when staff members had a temporary reprieve from their usual workload. However, as COVID-19 restrictions start to lift and the centre's activities are returning to normal, there is concern that there will be limited capacity for its transformative organizational work as operational obligations return.

### Financial

- While Yukon Spin has been a tremendous success in terms of validating the virtual tour's business viability and tech feasibility, the **Yukon Transportation Museum** faces a challenge in garnering the dedicated human and financial resources needed to sustain and grow the pilot initiative.
- **ALAVIVA**'s art robot project sits at the nexus of the arts, health care, and technology. However, this complexity hasn't led to significant funding opportunities in any of these areas.

## 5. Small can be mighty

Innovation and resilience can happen at any scale. Even without large amounts of money, individual artists and small organizations have had outsized impacts on communities during the pandemic.

- The **Queer Songbook Orchestra**, the **Okanagan Children's Choir**, and **Eastern Front Theatre** got their projects started using modest savings. The orchestra and theatre were able to use the inaugural versions of their projects as a proof of concept to secure grants and community contributions.
- The **Strata Festival of New Music** implemented digital learning opportunities on a shoestring budget thanks to lightning-quick professional development.
- The **Yukon Transportation Museum's** innovative implementation of virtual cycling tours highlights how innovation can happen in smaller and rural centres just as easily as in larger urban centres.
- As a grassroots collective, the **Queer Songbook Orchestra** was accustomed to working with limited resources. The organization was able to stretch a modest guarantee from a public school's parent pride committee to meet the project's needs.
- Artist **Kiran Ambwani** was able to envision and deliver her project with only the personal support provided by the Canada Emergency Response Benefit.
- During the pandemic, many people have struggled with health issues, including the effects of isolation, anxiety, and overall mental health. The small Curbside Museum project of artist **Enza Apa** and **artsPlace Canmore** enabled residents of Canmore, Alberta to see their own stories and histories reflected.
- Several small organizations took the opportunity of going virtual to expand their geographical reach far beyond its pre-pandemic capacity, securing new connections for the future. **Eastern Front Theatre** worked with artists from across Atlantic Canada. The **Newfoundland Symphony's** programming reached Labrador for the first time. The **Festival of Literary Diversity**, based in Brampton, Ontario, targeted and acquired paid visitors from as far as Vancouver and the United States.



*Small things can have a larger impact in terms of being able to show off the talent and ingenuity of Atlantic Canadian artists.*

**Kat MacCormack**  
Eastern Front Theatre

## 6. Partnerships can extend capacity and reach

Many innovators have discovered novel directions and new ways of working by leaning on external organizations for their expertise and networks. Partners have included organizations and businesses outside the arts, culture, and heritage. Our research found many examples of significant partnerships, a few of which are highlighted below.

**Emma Hendrix**  
Video Pool

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*Partnerships are so, so important. We don't do it alone, we do it with others. And that is really informative, and difficult because you have to be willing to be in a vulnerable space. You just spend the time and the effort to really think about how you take care of each other.*

- For the digital edition of the **Alianait Arts Festival** in 2020, a distribution partnership with television broadcaster NorthwTel was vital to the festival's delivery to audiences across the North and internationally. With limited internet availability and bandwidth in the North, streaming can be unstable.
- The co-hosts of the Crip Times podcast series from **Tangled Arts + Disability** (Yousef Kadoura, Kayla Besse, and Kristina McMullin) brought together a group of talented partners (University of Guelph, Bodies in Translation, Wheels on the Ground, Ryerson University, and others) to bring the series to fruition and ensure maximum accessibility.
- **Video Pool**, in aiming to become more accessible, worked closely with the Arts AccessAbility Network of Manitoba, Manitoba Association of Playwrights, Creative Manitoba, and New Media Manitoba.
- Through its Tech Bundles project, the **Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance** hopes to serve the diversity of Indigenous artists and communities throughout Canada. To do this, the Alliance is working to partner with local Indigenous centres or organizations that can house, manage, and facilitate the sharing of the Tech Bundles' resources within their communities and regions. Furthermore, the project would not have been possible without the partnership of the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Department of Canadian Heritage, Apple Canada, and Long & McQuade.
- **STEPS Public Art** has built long-term partnerships with business improvement areas (BIAs), foundations, and corporations. These well-nurtured partnerships, which have led to trusting relationships with the STEPS team, allowed the organization to quickly create its 2020 Main Street Art Challenge. Building on the success of its efforts in 2020, STEPS launched I HeART Main Street in 2021 to support BIAs of all sizes across Ontario, to strengthen business-community relationships, and to provide meaningful opportunities for local Canadian artists.

- **re:Naissance Opera** was able to achieve its vision of a virtual reality opera through a partnership with the Sawmill, a Vancouver-based motion capture studio. The studio's partial in-kind donation of expertise, consultation, and studio time gave the project a level of technical skill and capacity that would otherwise have added significant cost.
- For **BEING Studio**, the process of curating the Artist Connect symposium brought them in close collaboration with other disability-centred organizations and resulted in tremendous organizational learning. Each staff member had the opportunity to engage with knowledge experts, reflect, and grow as they learned from each event.



## 7. Equity bolsters resilience, and resilience enhances equity

The tough fight for equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization compounded the burden of the pandemic on artists and organizations from equity-seeking communities. However, we also found that an equity lens helped focus organizations' goals and guide the rapid decision-making needed at the beginning of the pandemic.

**Jael Richardson**  
Festival of  
Literary Diversity

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*Because we focus on marginalized communities, we knew if there were vulnerable communities involved, we couldn't hold [the festival] for some and exclude others.*

Reciprocally, resilience can contribute to greater equity in the arts and heritage: organizations and artists who are resilient - who have time, resources, flexibility, and a culture of innovation - are better positioned to make decisions with equity and a diversity of perspectives in mind.

While diverse artists and organizations led by Indigenous Peoples, Black people, disabled people, and racialized people are leaders in the fight for equity, the entire sector is called to contribute.

- **Being Studio** worked to deepen conversations about disability arts in a virtual space. A key refrain throughout its Artist Connect project was the idea that disability is not an absence, but rather a valuable presence. This powerful idea left a deep impression on participating artists as well as the staff and volunteers from the six participating organizations.
- The **Festival of Literary Diversity's** April 2020 festival pivoted to Zoom in a matter of weeks, in part because the marginalized communities that the festival serves were also the most vulnerable to COVID-19. The organization's digital shift required a steep learning curve that ultimately set a new bar for virtual literary festivals.
- The members of the **Afros In Tha City** media collective have helped raise important issues in the Black community. Black leadership and freedom of expression are critical in continuing this work.
- **Kiran Ambwani's** Can-Asian Artistic Resilience project responded to anti-Asian racism brought on by the pandemic by showing the positive contributions that the Asian community has made, thus helping to combat the racism that affects it.
- A podcast series from **Tangled Arts** was created during the pandemic to find new ways of engaging disabled artists and prioritizing access for disabled communities. The artists, scholars, and activists who participated in the podcast series shared expertise about the isolation that they experience as a daily part of their lives, in contrast to the larger mainstream community that was experiencing this for the first time.
- The **Carving on the Edge Festival** was founded in 2010 by a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous carvers and artists in Tofino, BC as a way to deepen the knowledge and cultural exchange needed to sustain the practice of carving. A deeply shared love of

wood carving has fostered a spirit of reconciliation and a cultural pathway between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people across different generations. This same spirit is what made the digital edition of the festival so meaningful for everyone at a time when they needed to be in the company of each other the most, even when technology itself can be a barrier.

- **Video Pool**'s efforts during the pandemic have been strongly focused on enhancing the equity of its services. As part of this push, the organization created a series called *BIPOC Tech Talk* to respond to the arts community's need for a BIPOC centered space for conversations about technology. Rather than directing the group, Video Pool encouraged the group to be led and developed by the participants.

Equity-seeking groups can face distinct challenges. The **Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance**'s challenges in securing local partners outside of urban centres speak to the historic lack of arts infrastructure and limited investment in rural artists and communities.

Ado Nkemka, editor at **Afros In Tha City** noted that, "in Calgary, we have a hard time, at least for Black and POC [people of colour] communities, keeping our artists here. We are trying to build a community where people don't feel like they have to leave to make it or to feel legitimized as artists."

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*If you want to understand Black lives, we need freedom in our expression. Some people in our collective have had experiences working with different organizations and felt that they were censored through the editorial process or felt like they had to wrap their story with a nice bow, which isn't always the case. Sometimes there isn't necessarily a happy ending. There's always something to learn, but I think it goes back to that freedom, flexibility piece. If you really want to hear our voices, you have to be committed to opening yourself up to accepting truths that are not necessarily fluffy and easy to digest.*

**Ado Nkemka**  
Afros In Tha City

## 8. Sometimes, just jump

Occasionally, opportunities appear. Other times, opportunities are made, or at least discovered. Many innovators decided to take a first step — often a big leap into the unknown — even if they didn't know their exact destination. A spirit of openness to small experiments and a commitment to learning from those experiences allowed artists and organizations to become more resilient in the face of disruptions and uncertainty.

**Laïla Mestari**



*You have to take risks instead of saying that it's not possible to do things like we always have. You have to be bold and try things that have never been done before.*

- A podcast series from **Tangled Arts + Disability** was produced and hosted by Yousef Kadoura, Kayla Besse, and Kristina McMullin. The artist trio had never produced a podcast before and learned a great deal through trial and error.
- In partnership with the LOBE artists' centre in Chicoutimi, artist **Laïla Mestari** showed that with a bit of audacity and a lot of work, it was possible to present an in-person visual art exhibit in the middle of the pandemic, at a time when virtually everything was closed.
- The artist residencies in **Fredericton Playhouse's** InterMISSION project started modestly and grew with the available resources. The residencies served as a pilot project that helped the Playhouse envision how residencies could fit into a regular season.
- Creating a virtual reality opera is a very new concept. **re:Naissance Opera** took on the daunting task of creating for this emerging technology. There have been many steep learning curves for the organization, often without any precedents to rely on. The re:Naissance Opera team explored every aspect of opera-making in this new medium with a learning mindset, embracing the process as an exciting part of the project, but it was also one that added unanticipated time and costs.
- Derek Chan of **rice & beans theatre** emphasized the importance of play and experimentation, especially when adapting to a digital environment. Trying new things, failing, succeeding, adapting, and iterating are all important parts of theatre's innovation process.



*With enough funding, we could sort of jump in the deep end of the pool and say 'okay, let's just do this'.*

**Paul Suchan**  
Strata Festival

## 9. Prioritizing and connecting with artists

At the onset of the pandemic, many in the arts and heritage sector felt adrift. Deciding where to focus was difficult, and designing programming to engage Canadians while respecting health restrictions was complex and time-consuming. Innovators who focused on the needs of their closest stakeholders and communities — artists — were able to quickly centre their goals and define a path forward.

**Hugh Donnan**  
Newfoundland  
Symphony Orchestra



*Everybody had choices. We could have put our heads in the sand and just caretake. But we didn't just want to disappear for a year. Right from the beginning, the goal was, because we weren't as hard-hit as other places, to get as many musicians on stage as possible so we could pay them.*

- Committing to an online format allowed the **Alianait Arts Festival** to take presentation opportunities out to a much wider range of Northern artists. This new format reached communities from Greenland to Alaska, allowing the festival to begin building a more comprehensive network of artistic and cultural presenters across the North.
- Going dark during the lockdown made it possible for theatre organizations like the **Fredericton Playhouse** and **Eastern Front Theatre** to put time and resources toward developing non-public-facing strategic initiatives that generated work and creation opportunities for local artists.
- **Kiran Ambwani** connected with over 130 artists as part of her virtual photography project. Her goals included motivating other artists and communities to stay connected, to help each other out, and to stand together.
- The **Newfoundland Symphony**'s decisions were led by a desire "to get as many musicians on stage as possible so we could pay them," said Executive Director Hugh Donnan. This led to innovative ways of connecting with audiences, including a Pay-It-Forward subscription model and an outreach program targeting seniors' residences.
- **Video Pool** kept its artist communities at the forefront of its decision-making, which allowed the organization to move forward without leaving important communities behind.
- The **Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance** entered the pandemic with confirmed funding for a major initiative to create a Northern performing arts touring network. Pandemic restrictions led them to look closely at the needs of organizations in their Northern and remote partner network, and to devise a digital version of the project to respond to these needs. Instead of sending touring artists to remote locations, the Alliance equipped its remote partners with gear, software and expertise that allowed them to broadcast virtual performances.

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*We were able to consider how we could boost the careers of so many more people, rather than just one playwright a year.*

**Kat MacCormack**  
Eastern Front Theatre

## 10. Short-term innovations can lead to longer-term changes

While most of the innovations we studied were designed to get artists and organizations through the pandemic, many will have a significant impact in the longer term.

**Kat MacCormack**  
Eastern Front Theatre



*It was ultimately uplifting and really inspirational, for me even. It has helped us now look forward in a new way.*

- The Seniors Outreach project allowed the **Newfoundland Symphony Orchestra** to reach people across Newfoundland and Labrador. Said Hugh Donnan, Executive Director, “this is a permanent arm of our operations, for sure”. An upcoming change in name, to the Newfoundland and Labrador Symphony Orchestra, reflects this new reach.
- The **Musée d’art de Rouyn-Noranda**’s increased visibility through its MA Virtuel project will allow the museum to pursue new opportunities and develop new partnerships.
- The **Woodland Cultural Centre** continues to expand its suite of virtual tours to extend its audience across Canada and beyond.
- Rather than rushing to implement temporary COVID-19-specific measures, **Video Pool** has worked toward long-lasting strategies to increase access to the centre’s services.
- The connections made through **BEING Studio**’s Artist Connect symposium brought tremendous energy to the organization. Its experimentation with digital engagements and partnerships with organizations outside of the Ottawa region highlighted the role that the organization can play in a larger conversation about the disability justice movement and improving access to the arts.
- The online **PEI Student Drama Festival** and **ArtsSmarts** programs were pandemic-inspired teaching and learning formats that are expected to be expanded in the future.
- **Théâtre Cercle Molière** plans to incorporate a digital format into its future young artist festivals, because of the great accessibility allowed by virtual programming. Students at schools far outside of Winnipeg can benefit from the virtual format.

## 11. Important places of exchange

Some pandemic innovations show that artists and cultural organizations can be at the forefront of engaging in dialogues about the compelling histories, stories, issues, and ideas that exist in every community. In this context, cultural organizations are often important places of exchange.

- In creating popular virtual tours, the **Woodland Cultural Centre** greatly expanded its reach, thereby allowing many more visitors to hear the important stories told by the Centre's programming. The Centre has also worked to deepen audience members' participation by enhanced storytelling.
- The **Yukon Transportation Museum's** Yukon Spin project has the potential to engage many new visitors in the territory's past, present, and future.
- **rice & beans theatre's** digital innovations show that storytelling in new forms can build audiences. The company also recognizes that shared learning is key to future success of the sector.
- **Alianait Arts Festival's** digital pivot greatly increased its audience, thereby sharing the powerful voices of Northern artists and cultural presenters and broadening understanding of cultural communities in the North.
- For the **Okanagan Children's Choir**, providing composition training through a digital format increased access to learning opportunities. The organization successfully engaged children at a time when that was very difficult, especially in the choral arts.
- **Tangled Arts'** podcast series *Crip Times* generated discussions among artists, scholars, and activists about important issues in the disability community.
- The virtual concerts of the **Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal** allowed the orchestra to reach new audiences. For example, the first school to register for the Youth Matinees was from Nunavik, in Northern Quebec. The first concert conducted by Rafael Payare, the orchestra's new Music Director, garnered 125,000 views across 80 countries.

## 12. Redefining the arts and heritage

Many innovators have done nothing short of redefining their artform. Many worked to redefine the creative process itself.

- In **Dancemakers'** *Liveness* residency, Luke Garwood and collaborators explored ways to redefine dance performance in a virtual setting, using motion capture, digital manipulation, and animation.
- **re:Naissance Opera's** *Orpheus VR* project explored opera creation within a 360°, interactive environment, which required the music and text to be flexible and modular, rather than linear like a traditional opera. The company's innovation and experimentation with the artform was intended to allow new ideas to flourish and to grow opera, rather than taking away from or tearing down what has come before.
- **rice & beans theatre** designed a version of a play that could be experienced without live actors while still remaining somewhat interactive through an outdoor digital installation with sound design.

Many heritage organizations pushed the boundaries of how they present their collections during the pandemic.

- When no one could pay an in-person visit to the **Yukon Transportation Museum's** collection, the organization explored what it means to digitally bring to life the history and stories of transportation in the Yukon - through the lens of a bicycle. These virtual tours of the territory helped fulfil the museum's mandate.
- The **Woodland Cultural Centre** attempted to balance history while expanding how audiences interact with Indigenous arts and heritage. Through virtual tours, visitors can better understand the full scope of Haudenosaunee history, including both the residential school system and the vitality of the community's art, language, and culture.
- A collaboration between artist **Enza Apa** and **artsPlace Canmore**, the Curbside Museum challenged the museum construct and made everyday objects and stories "precious".

Other innovators embarked on slightly less ambitious projects that nonetheless reimaged how they work in their artform. For example, photographer **Kiran Ambwani** changed her usual process for her *Can-Asian Artistic Resilience* project, in which she "photographed" subjects via screen captures over Zoom.

## Looking toward Phase 2

This research forms the basis for the project's second phase, which involves professional development to transmit key learnings to other cultural organizations and artists. By undertaking new directions, promoting diverse voices, combatting racism, limiting staff layoffs, or increasing revenues, the innovative practices outlined above provided some stability for the artists and organizations. More broadly, these findings should help build resilience within the arts and heritage sector.



# 29 stories

of artists and organizations using innovation  
to find resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic



# Afros In Tha City Media Collective: Centering Black voices and experiences in Calgary and beyond

Story Seeker: Kelly Hill

Person interviewed: Ado Nkemka, Editor

Interview date: July 29, 2021

Founded in 2016, Afros In Tha City is a small, multidisciplinary arts collective located in Calgary (Mohkínstsis, as it is known in Blackfoot, a recognition of place that the collective includes in its communications).

In July 2020, a media collective (largely composed of writers, all of whom are Black or mixed-race Black) was created within Afros In Tha City. Distributed mainly [via its website](#), the collective's stories "centre Black lives, discuss issues that concern Black people, and explore topics relevant to the Black experience". Whether sharing stories about white supremacy, skin tone, or hair, the collective "is committed to producing high quality, local, trope-less, stereotype-less content that amplifies Black voices and supports community". (Source: [Afros In Tha City website](#)).



Editor Ado Nkemka felt like the collective "would be a really good opportunity to just say all the things that I've wanted to say that I haven't always had the courage to say". Through the collective, she said, "I finally found the place where I feel human, and where I feel like people understand where I'm coming from." The collective has seven members and operates quite informally.

While the collective is firmly rooted in Calgary, online distribution means that people from around the world "get to hear our stories".

In the context of the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, the writing collective significantly expanded its partnerships and reach, thereby helping to build both the organization and a sense of community among Black artists in Calgary and beyond.

## The Innovation: Developing partnerships to build a fledgling organization

Ado noted that the act of managing independent writers can be done online, and this aspect was not too challenging to coordinate during the pandemic. On the other hand, community building became much harder without the ability to bring people together in person.

To address this challenge and, more generally, to develop the collective, Afros In Tha City and its writing group built on its foundation and the reputation of its work to develop solid partnerships. As Ado indicated, the collective sometimes reached out to potential partners, and other times the potential partners reached out to them. Ado noted that the recent partnerships have been with a range of different organizations, some Black-led and some not.

Ado highlighted three important partnerships of Afros In Tha City Media collective, all of which were developed in the context of the pandemic.

Afros In Tha City Media collective gained momentum and legitimacy by working with the Canadian Association of Black Journalists (CABJ). Following Ado's participation in the CABJ's [Media Startup Bootcamp for Black digital storytellers](#) in 2020, the Association awarded Afros In Tha City Media collective a \$5,000 Seed Grant. The grant helped Ado realize that other people in the media industry value the collective's unique perspective: it "put some sort of battery in our pack to keep going". Afros In Tha City Editor-in-Chief Tomi Ajele is a participant in the 2021 edition of the Bootcamp. The partnership with CABJ has now extended to mentorships and regular updates on job opportunities in the media industry.



The collective's partnership with [The Sprawl](#), a crowdfunded independent Alberta journalism site, "has really been instrumental in our growth", said Ado. The Sprawl's Editor-in-Chief, Jeremy Klaszus, helped mentor the collective's members. The Sprawl also [published a profile](#) of Afros In Tha City.

The collective made an important connection outside the publishing world via the [Sled Island Music & Arts Festival](#). The festival reached out to Afros In Tha City, which resulted in a partnership and funding from the festival to help program Black artists in 2022.

## The Challenges: Mental health, retention of Black artists, and space issues

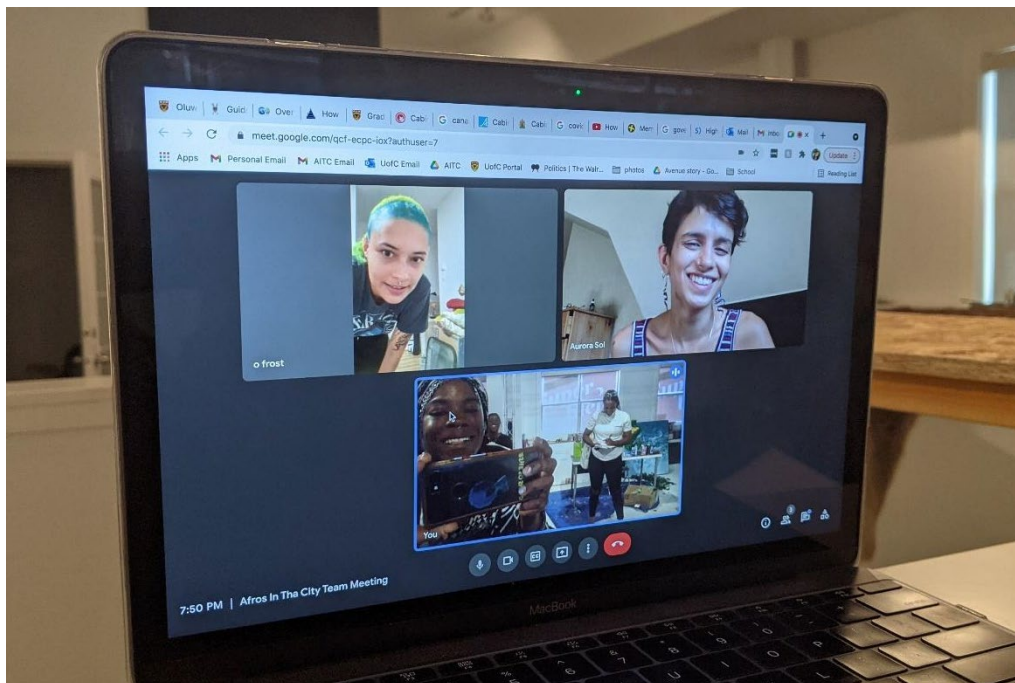
Like many other Canadians, members of the writing collective experienced the mental health effects of isolation during the pandemic. In response to this, the collective showed flexibility toward its members regarding their schedule and deadlines. Ado indicated that this level of “understanding has helped us with our sustainability” through the pandemic. The collective is “trying to make people feel like they truly have a voice and a space”, even if members (including Ado) have not been able to submit as regularly as they would like.

Keeping Black artists in Calgary is a major challenge, one that Afros In Tha City is working to change. According to Ado:

*In Calgary, we have a hard time, at least for Black and [people of colour] communities, keeping our artists here. We are trying to build a community where people don't feel like they have to leave to make it or to feel legitimized as artists.*

Afros In Tha City lost their multidisciplinary arts space in August of 2021 (after the interview with Ado had taken place). The space had been temporarily “loaned” to the organization, but the host company needed the space back. The irony: just as certain COVID-19 restrictions on gatherings are being lifted, the only spaces available to the collective are now digital.

The lack of a “fun gathering place” where there are few barriers to artists’ participation has made it more difficult to build community and “provide a safe and understanding space for Black artists and artists of colour”. Afros In Tha City is looking to find co-working space with an existing or potential new partner.



## The Financials: Small pots of money from various sources

In addition to funds earned through working with the Canadian Association of Black Journalists and Sled Island Festival (both noted above), [IndieGraf Media](#), a company that supports independent local news startups, has accepted the Afros In Tha City Media collective into a grant program that also offers a training component.

The collective also raises funds from arts supporters who use the [Patreon](#) platform. Working and presenting online over the past year has helped the collective develop its base of supporters. For example, after an online panel discussion presented by Afros In Tha City in February, the collective obtained many new [Patreon members](#).

Through subscriptions and other generated revenues, the collective has been able to pay its writers for their work but has not been able to compensate them for time spent on story editing or the group's administration and organization.

Despite having some success in raising funds in various ways, the collective's members are still working to expand their funding and funding sources. To date, the collective has not received any public funding.

## The Takeaway: Understanding Black lives requires freedom of expression and a willingness to listen

Through their work, the members of the Afros In Tha City Media collective have helped raise important issues in the Black community, both in Calgary and throughout Alberta. To continue to do this, Ado underlined the importance of freedom of expression among Black people as well as the importance of Black leadership in organizations:

*If you want to understand Black lives, we need freedom in our expression. Some people in our collective have had experiences working with different organizations and felt that they were censored through the editorial process or felt like they had to wrap their story with a nice bow, which isn't always the case. Sometimes there isn't necessarily a happy ending. There's always something to learn, but I think it goes back to that freedom, flexibility piece. If you really want to hear our voices, you have to be committed to opening yourself up to accepting truths that are not necessarily fluffy and easy to digest.*



## ALAVIVA and Maelström créatif: Mixing business with pleasure

Story Seeker: Myriam Benzakour-Durand

Person interviewed: Andrée Pelletier, founder and director of development

Interview date: July 15, 2021

ALAVIVA is an organization that uses technology to help stimulate and break down the isolation of older adults and people with reduced mobility. Maelström créatif, an initiative of ALAVIVA, is a bit like a conveyor belt in that it connects cultural organizations with people living in seniors' residences and residential and long-term care centres in Quebec (known as CHSLD). The project addresses two societal issues: 1) the lack of cognitive and physical stimulation as well as the social isolation of older adults who, as a result, experience an accelerated loss of autonomy, and 2) the precarious financial situation of cultural workers, who are subject to fluctuating employment cycles (contract work, seasonal employment, and so forth).

### The Innovation: A robot that serves the arts

When the pandemic began in March 2020, Andrée Pelletier, founder and director of development for ALAVIVA, saw a pressing need “to connect humans with other humans”. Feeling a sense of urgency, she borrowed a telepresence robot to pair interpretive guides from museums that were closed with older adults stuck in their residences. The robot offered, for example, remote access to a virtual tour of the works in the Pointe-à-Callière Museum in Montreal, putting the individual at the centre of the experience. In this activity, a cultural mediator in Montreal was livestreamed on the robot screen, giving the viewer a tour of the exhibition from their residence in Quebec City.

The first activities were offered in order to conduct user testing in the residence where her father lived and where she was also a family caregiver. For Andrée, the telepresence robot made it possible to connect “face to face, with smiles that were clearly visible—something that is in short supply in the residences,” in addition to making a virtual tour possible.

User testing showed the project had great potential and was easily accessible for staff members and people living in the residences. These findings encouraged Maelström créatif to become a pillar for ALAVIVA. The project was in keeping with the organization's original mission, which was “to foster an active lifestyle and social inclusion for older adults and people with reduced mobility”, and it went on to add “with technologies”. Andrée plans to purchase several telepresence robots to offer on a rental basis and to use in the management of her matchmaking service that pairs cultural workers with residents. In addition, she increased the number of cultural offerings by identifying additional partners in different disciplines – museums, music, clowning, and recreational tourism.

Her connection with a development team in France led to the discovery of a robot named Cutii, designed for home care services. This new telepresence robot expanded ALAVIVA's services to include an entirely different clientele, who had safety and support needs. This allowed the

organization to get involved in the areas of health and personal care in addition to cultural services and stimulation.

## **The Challenges: Complexity, training, and novelty**

The complexity of the business model made it more difficult to access funding. Although there is support for the project in cultural settings as well as from healthcare workers and older adults, government budgets for this type of project currently do not exist since there are three types of costs: technology (the device, connection, Wi-Fi, and so forth); funding for cultural facilitators (currently funded through the budgets of cultural organizations); and the management, coaching, and matchmaking components, all of which are overseen by ALAVIVA. “The Ministry of Education has budgets for cultural outings for schools. But this sort of thing doesn’t exist when it is for health issues. And the budgets are very small. We felt that it would be a good idea to draw from this model and apply it to health issues,” Andrée explained.

Programming for such a diverse clientele (older adults and people with reduced mobility) requires specialized knowledge and a certain level of agility. Since the facilitators are primarily partners – guides, artistic mediators, artists, and in-house volunteer teams – the organization needs to oversee the management, coaching, and matchmaking services. ALAVIVA brings the added value of finding the right match for the job, which benefits both the client and the facilitator.

Andrée has participated in numerous research projects on different levels and with various research angles in order to show the benefits of telepresence robots. According to Andrée:

*There are several active centres for research on aging that study all kinds of gerontology activities. Many researchers are interested in that. I meet with them and pitch the product by saying, ‘Here is a tool that could be fun for you to use in a research project.’ We can help this product evolve, not just to sell robots, but participate in a solution, in a major social issue.*

These research projects and calls for solutions have a common goal of finding a little bit of funding or finalizing a few sales. This money would allow the organization to hire employees to develop the two primary components of the project, one of which focuses on the technological, material, and logistical aspects; the other of which focuses on training, management, and matchmaking.

## **The Financials: Generate interest to free up budgets**

The enthusiasm for the project is undeniable. Securing funding is rather difficult, however, because of the project’s novelty as well as the lack of a government budget category to support it. Andrée’s efforts to gain visibility, obtain funding, and finalize sales are very important for the future of this innovative project.

In addition to reaching out to active aging research centres, the Maelström créatif founder is seeking clients whom she calls early adopters. She describes them as somewhat affluent, “minimally open to technologies, who enjoy their living environment and want to keep living at home, and whose children are reasonably tech-oriented and willing to help with the robot.”

Before the pandemic, this clientele had a \$15,000 budget for activities and outings such as dining in restaurants, traveling, and attending cultural activities. This clientele currently represents the rental potential of the robots available through ALAVIVA, until such time when the organization secures funding to make the robots available for less affluent clients as well.

## **The Takeaways: Make connections, test ideas quickly, and develop a network**

The creation of this project meets several social needs – the aging of the population, the stabilization of employment for cultural workers, and the lack of healthcare workers. According to Andrée, the need is there for her innovation:

*In 2031, the aging population will reach its peak. And there will be just 2.31 workers for each older adult. That's not a lot of people who will be working for quite a few people. The population is aging, healthcare is constantly improving, but the number of months and years for which we need more healthcare is increasing.*

Artists will no longer have to worry about paying the rent: “Because if I don’t have a play at the theatre, I can always work for ALAVIVA for two or three months. Then I can stop or slow down when I have a play.”

Maelström créatif provides a solution that connects health, employment, and culture. “My wish is that this will really allow a large number of people to remain at home longer, and that it will give other people new tools to meet the needs of older adults, despite the labour shortage.”

Andrée communicates the importance of testing ideas quickly in order to identify needs, validate ideas, test prototypes, and improve offerings. She refers to this as open innovation or design thinking. To find suitable solutions for the issues at hand, it is important to involve the clientele. According to Andrée:

*We interviewed and gave questionnaires to the staff, older adults, and a few family members to gauge the true level of interest. The pilot project took place in four seniors' residences and CHSLDs and lasted eight weeks. We learned some things, and now we know where we stand and where we want to go.*

According to Andrée, ALAVIVA’s development and exploration phase took five or six years prior to the pandemic, during which time they created a network, identified partners, and developed good credibility. It was necessary to have this pool before implementing the project. The process was long and consisted of one small advance after another. She participated in competitions like Cooperathon and La Piscine International Program, she approached research centres and potential partners, and she even contacted parliamentarians.

The Maelström créatif founder is a woman who is passionate about her work and convinced that her project will make positive contributions for older adults and people with reduced mobility, as well as for cultural workers and healthcare employees. For her, Maelström créatif is “50% for the employees and 50% for the residents because everyone goes away with a little piece of happiness.”



## Alianait Arts Festival: Sounds of a virtual North

Story Seeker: JP Longboat

Person interviewed: Victoria Perron, Festival Director

Interview date: August 23, 2021

The Alianait Arts Festival is known as the world's circumpolar stage and is Nunavut's premier arts festival. The festival sets the spotlight on Inuit and other circumpolar artists working in music, visual art, film, theatre, circus, dance, and storytelling. Alianait presents performances from across the North and throughout the world at their annual festival and year-round concert series. Alianait is the Inuktitut word for "wonderful" and can be used as an exclamation or an expression of joy.

Alianait has always believed that the arts are vitally important to the health of Nunavummut (i.e., residents of Nunavut), and remains committed to supporting artists and cultural presenters in bringing the arts to communities during these difficult times.

### **The Innovation: Working through a rapid shift in landscape**

Since the festival is held annually in late June, the planning and organizing for the 2020 edition of the festival fell right in the first and second waves of the pandemic. In March 2020, Nunavut declared a public health emergency, including recommendations for social distancing, limiting gatherings to no more than five people, and restrictions to non-essential travel. Lockdown and public safety restrictions made it impossible to produce the festival as ordinarily carried out. Festival Director Victoria Perron and her production team needed to find some alternatives – a way to pivot – because they were committed to delivering the festival.

In March 2019, Alianait had already started to explore streaming online concerts and in June 2019 initiated a 15-week online concert series with one live concert each week. In 2020, the team drew on their experience to formulate an innovative plan, inspired by the success of their 2019 experiences. Adapting through pandemic restrictions, Alianait decided to take the festival fully online for the first time ever. The festival was very excited to announce that a special online edition would take place on November 21 and 22, 2020. The festival expanded the first-time virtual edition to present artists from 25 communities across the North. Live festival content was also screened on Alianait's YouTube channel and Facebook page, as well as broadcast through a partnership with NorthwTel Community TV, as part of a vital project partnership with NorthwTel.

Live events and concerts were streamed online throughout the weekend starting on Saturday afternoon and were presented in a format similar to an in-person Alianait show. Alianait utilized the skills of three videographers to incorporate artist and community stories during short, 30-second to two-minute breaks in between live performances. Alianait also incorporated live emcees throughout the festival. Audiences saw some of their favourite Northern bands and had the opportunity to discover new and emerging talent from across Nunavut and beyond.

## **The Challenges: Across large fields of snow and ice**

It was challenging to program all the artists and cultural presenters and work with them to prepare their presentations in a timely manner, as some had never recorded themselves before. The majority of the artists and presenters needed significant assistance to set up, prepare for, and deliver their online presentations. Many had low levels of computer literacy. With only limited quality camera equipment across the North, Alianait and the festival team began to explore the use of cellphones as well as any suitable computers that might be available.

The festival team in Iqaluit had to supply a great deal of assistance and would talk to each of the 30+ artists personally. Interestingly, the team found that the farther away from a significant Internet source, the less knowledgeable the presenters seemed to be. The festival's approach focused on building connections within each community. This outreach began with the local infrastructure – organizations and cultural associations – and branched out to include various program coordinators, teachers, and community leaders.

Supported by these resources, the artists and cultural presenters found innovation through a process that incorporated experimentation, discovery, and learning as they were figuring out ways to make it happen from their own locations. Victoria spoke of working with artists in 25 communities: “at times it got complex, some wanted to quit, but we supported them all the way through, even sent a computer with my friend to Yellowknife, so they had something to work on and do their presentation.”

Bandwidth is a huge factor across the North, which presents ongoing challenges in transmission, and streaming can often be unstable. Therefore, the availability of shows via a TV broadcast, thanks to the partnership with NorthwTel, was an incredibly important element to the successful delivery of the 2020 festival to audiences across the North and internationally.

## **The Financials: Adaptation and community support**

Alianait made some financial adjustments with the support of its funders and reexamined its existing grants, reprioritizing and contextualizing some of its funding to take on the new festival delivery format. It focused on two things: making the festival more community-oriented, and taking this opportunity to expand their reach across the North and include more diverse communities. This aspect was very new, because it had previously focused on a more regional approach.

Partnerships were essential in making the vision for the festival a reality. Alianait has fostered an active core group of volunteers, which needed to be expanded for this new initiative in order to supply a significant number of hours. The investment from NorthwTel was also key. “I’m proud that we can help the Alianait Arts Festival continue its tradition, showcasing talented northern artists”, said NorthwTel President Curtis Shaw. He continued: “NorthwTel is a longtime supporter of arts and culture in the North. So, it makes sense that as a telecommunications provider for the North, we can help present this year’s festival in a new, virtual format and keep sharing Northern talent with the world.”

## **The Takeaway: Forming the circle larger**

Once Alianait committed to an online format, it allowed the festival to think in a broader context and take the presentation opportunities out to a much wider range of Northern artists. This new format was inclusive of a variety of communities from Greenland to Alaska, allowing the festival to begin building a more comprehensive network of artistic and cultural presenters.

Alianait is now working with Northern TV and Radio to foster and provide opportunities for more artistic production. The 2020 festival experience allowed Alianait to set goals for better quality video and sound, as the organization looks to strengthen a broader Northern network.

Livestreaming the festival and presenting through various social media platforms were successful methods for getting the information out about each concert, instructions on how to tune in, and ways to keep informed with the latest programming updates.

Other key outcomes for Alianait include the following:

- Building deeper relationships and expanding its local core of volunteers.
- Advancing the capacity of the local Iqaluit community.
- Connecting through hands-on engagement with some 30 Northern communities and fostering learning and capacity building within each of these places and their participants.
- Increasing the audience for the live festival to over 8,000 viewers, and to 60,000 for the overall festival experience, thereby broadening knowledge and understanding of these cultural communities and sharing the beautiful and powerful voices of Northern artists and cultural presenters.

## Artist Connect from BEING Studio: The valuable presence of disabled artists

Story Seeker: Margaret Lam

Person interviewed: Rachel Gray, Executive Director (former Artistic Director)

Interview date: July 6, 2021

Between January and March 2021, BEING Studio held an online symposium entitled “Artist Connect”. This three-month long program featured 25 Zoom events. They were attended by over 150 disabled artists from BEING Studio (Ottawa), Propeller Dance (Ottawa), The Space (Ottawa), H’Art Centre (Kingston), National accessArts Centre (Calgary), and the Nina Haggerty Centre (Edmonton) who had the opportunity to meet digitally and share their art with each other.

Artist Connect is captured in a video report that offers a glimpse of what the experience was like for the participants, revealing insights about how to create spaces for meaningful connections when all we have is a device, a camera, an internet connection, and each other.

### The Innovation: Ways of deepening conversations about disability arts in a virtual space

BEING Studio (formerly known as H’Art of Ottawa) is an art studio that has served artists with developmental disabilities in the Ottawa region since 2002. It offers a place where artists working on visual art and creative writing can cultivate their artistic practice, connect with the disability arts community, and receive support in promoting and selling their art.

Ever since participating in the Crippling The Arts Symposium in 2019, BEING Studio has worked to connect with artist studios that support disabled artists across Canada in order to create an informal exchange of specialized knowledge and resources.

Prior to the global pandemic, the level of coordination and planning required to bring everyone together in person for meaningful engagement required a substantial level of human and financial resources.

During the pandemic, BEING Studio adapted quickly to offer “Virtual Coffees”: informal online spaces where BEING artists could meet and socialize. As they gained experience in facilitating interactions between artists in a videoconferencing environment, and the need to fill the gap of human-to-human connection increased, the idea of Artist Connect was born.



Artist Connect was designed to offer a forum for friendship and knowledge exchange. BEING Studio wanted to understand *how* other studios serving artists with developmental disabilities were impacted by the pandemic.,

A strength of Artist Connect is their digital facilitation practice. Every event required a close collaboration between BEING Studio hosts and the guest speakers to prepare plain or clear language versions of their presentations. Though there is no formula for accomplishing this, it is clear that distilling a topic down to its essence requires dialogue and conversation.

BEING Studio also intentionally incorporated movement and play in many of their sessions, just as they do with their in-person programming. Naomi Tessler from Branch Out Theatre had a dedicated session to use theatre games and exercises as an embodied way to communicate the Artist Connect community agreement.

## **The Challenges: Plain language, adapting to various levels of digital literacy, and creating a welcoming digital environment**

Delivering such thoughtful facilitation in a digital context is not easy, but it started with a simple question, “How can we problem-solve together?”

Given the need for plain language, the two session hosts engaged with the speakers in advance to ensure integrity of the content, while ensuring that language would not create a barrier for access.



This can be a challenging process but ultimately a generative one for all parties. Speakers found that it helped them get to the core of their message and improved the audience’s understanding. Hosts increased their professional knowledge and understanding on topics ranging from use of digital tools to disability culture and identity.

Within the context of disability arts, successful in-person facilitation relies on reading body language and the dynamics between participants. Both of these things are absent in a digital setting. The difference in participants’ digital literacy also made it challenging for facilitators and participants to

know how to interact and engage. As such, running successful online events required an adaptive “in the moment” approach to facilitation.

In order to create a warm and welcoming digital environment while accounting for the challenges described above, it was important to ask: Who are we not hearing from? How is this digital environment structured? How can we invite contributions from those not comfortable speaking?”

Asking these questions were more important than having definitive guidelines and structure. This is a facilitation approach that prioritizes understanding where people are speaking from, actively

listening and weaving in the different perspectives, and reaching out to as many participants in the room as possible. The extended three-month timeframe of Artist Connect also made it possible to build up the trust and rapport needed to understand the participants' different digital needs and preferences.

One final challenge was determining how to report back to the community in a way that was true to the spirit that had permeated the whole project. While the intention to generate a report was there from the start, a traditional written report would not be fully accessible to the disability community.

BEING Studio addressed this by defining for themselves what data was meaningful to collect, the questions that they were most interested in exploring, and what was most meaningful to share back with the community. Their work was supported by Story Seeker Margaret Lam, the design research lead at Creative Users Projects. The result is a video report (available at [beinghome.ca](http://beinghome.ca)) that conveys the Artist Connect experience as well as the learning and insights that emerged. They also developed a [checklist](#) for running online events.

## **The Financials: Funder support in the short term, with insights into alternative revenue streams over time**

With an annual operating budget of about \$200,000, Artist Connect was a fairly large undertaking, including about \$60,000 in direct costs plus administrative overhead. Program delivery costs associated with Artist Connect included speaker fees for special guests and artists. These were supported by the project's funders, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ottawa Community Foundation, with additional support from individual donors.

This Artist Connect symposium was free to attend for anyone affiliated with the participating organizations and studios. Given that these organizations each serve a very specialized community of artists with developmental disabilities, the event was not expected to be a revenue-generating activity. Modest revenue was generated through donations and increased visibility of the online shop, where art created by BEING Studio artists is available for purchase.

Since concluding the Artist Connect symposium, there has been tremendous energy within the organization to think of their potential impact in broader issues such as disability justice. While the specific areas are still emerging, there will certainly be explorations on alternative revenue streams in relation to new kinds of activities for the organization.

## **The Impact: Artistic development, new connections, and a new focus**

A key refrain throughout Artist Connect was the idea that disability is not an absence, but rather a valuable presence. This powerful idea left a deep impression on the staff and volunteers from all six organizations, and the more than 150 artists who participated. There were countless numbers of "hidden" participants - the partners, guardians, family members, and support workers who are just outside of the frame. These countless individuals will remain witnesses to the impactful changes in artists long after the event concluded.



For BEING Studio, the process of curating Artist Connect brought them in close collaboration with other disability-centred organizations, such as the Disability Justice Network in Ontario. It resulted in tremendous organizational learning, as each staff member had the opportunity to engage with knowledge experts, reflect, and grow as they learned from each event.

In the process of experimentation with digital engagements and partnership building with organizations that are outside of the Ottawa region, BEING Studio began to recognize the role that their Ottawa-based community organization can play in a larger conversation about the disability justice movement and improving access to the arts.



Even after in-person gathering becomes possible again, BEING Studio will continue to offer digital events and programs in order to reach artists who may not be able to attend in person and to expand their connections with different communities of disabled artists across Canada.

## **The Takeaways: Accessibility, collaboration, and the impacts of the arts**

By approaching challenges with an openness to explore possible solutions and carving out the time that is needed to do it well, the Artist Connect process presented tremendous opportunity for learning and growth, including key takeaways such as:

- 1. The value of making spaces for voices who may not be empowered to speak.**

There is an opportunity to learn and grow when we take the time to seek out the missing voices and engage in a process to create spaces where they can be heard. They are opportunities to better understand our communities and ourselves, as well as to encounter perspectives and narratives that are off the beaten path, but no less human and relevant.

- 2. Ask questions that invite collaboration, rather than questions that have a “right” answer.**

As we all navigate digital landscapes, it becomes increasingly clear that there are no magic bullets and that everything requires negotiation. By embracing this as a constant in all digital interactions and actively paying attention to and making room for how others prefer to engage, we can become more critical of the digital tools that we use and more in tune with each other.

- 3. A report is an opportunity to check in and keep questions alive.**

The creation of a report offers an opportunity to articulate the purpose and format in

relation to the people for whom it is created and what is most valuable to them. Taking a creative approach to reporting can spark new conversations. It also expands the way we think about knowledge and how it is shared in order to benefit and empower others.

**4. The arts sector has a role to play in other parts of our society.**

The arts and culture sector has knowledge and insights from which other sectors such as health, community services, and even tech and social enterprises can learn. In order to situate and align our work in those contexts, we need to cultivate relationships with such organizations through project-based collaboration. They are opportunities to increase our understanding of those sectors and to create space for innovative approaches that will further our respective mandates.



## Carving on the Edge Festival: Community-centred digital practices in a remote and Indigenous context

Story Seeker: Margaret Lam

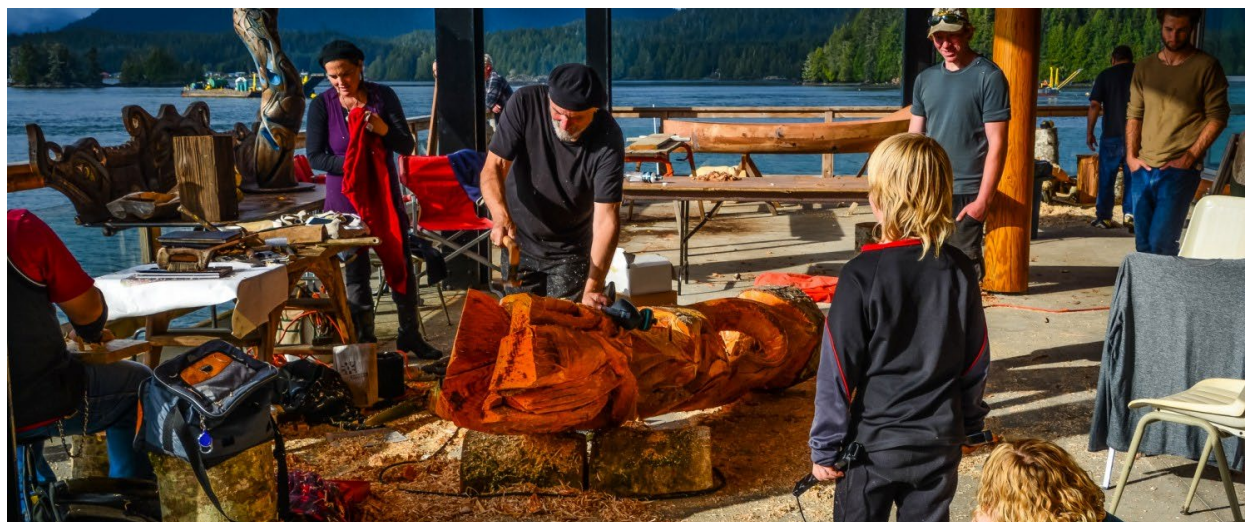
Person interviewed: Brianne Dempsey, Digital Events & Marketing Coordinator; financial details provided by H  l  ne Descoteaux, Administrator & Projects Coordinator

Interview date: August 19, 2021

The Carving on the Edge Festival was founded in 2010 by a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous carvers and artists in Tofino, British Columbia as a way to deepen the knowledge and cultural exchange needed to sustain their practice. While the Festival started as an annual event, in 2019 it became biannual in order to increase the organization's ability to provide administrative support and services to their members across the island and beyond.

Brianne Dempsey, Digital Events and Marketing Coordinator at Carving on the Edge, facilitated the transition of the in-person Festival experience to an online format, which would never have been a priority if it were not for the gathering and travel restrictions that came with the COVID-19 pandemic. The process of shifting such a hands-on and meditative art form that is passed on from generation to generation into a digital format presented the Festival with numerous challenges.

Guided by its unwavering focus on supporting and growing coastal wood carving traditions, the digital edition of the Festival continued to have the human impact they desired, while opening up new ways to continue their work.



## The Innovation: Digital marketing in a remote and Indigenous context

While innovation is often associated with new approaches, the wood carving practice that the Festival celebrates has roots that go back hundreds of years. The success of the online Festival was rooted in the organization's understanding of the desired human impact and not assuming that digital "best practices" can be applied wholesale to every context.

The pre-pandemic change to a biannual format was in response to increased artist demand for administrative support and a desire to expand the community-building activities that are inseparable from the artistic practice itself. The Festival has played an outsized role in facilitating the exchange of stories and knowledge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, as well as fostering mentorship relationships between experienced carvers, community elders, and youth.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Festival was faced with an incredible challenge: how to emulate its immersive and intimate nature in an online setting. Although Festival organizers had more questions than answers, they recognized early on the need for dedicated digital support. The new role of Digital Events and Marketing Coordinator was created to support the Festival and the overall organization.



## **The Challenge: Shifting an immersive and intimate in-person experience to a digital format**

Carving is a very personal, often solitary experience. In contrast, digital experiences can often feel impersonal. Because of this, many carvers felt hesitant and uncertain about the Festival's new formats of pre-recorded workshops and programs as well as live sessions on Zoom. There were further concerns that the traditional knowledge about carving practices being shared would not be properly stewarded and that meaningful connections between participants would not be feasible or possible.

For instance, one of the carvers recorded a five-part series that introduced viewers to the fundamentals of wood carving. He felt unnatural and awkward doing demonstrations in front of a video production crew instead of a live audience, and he expressed some hesitation around the sharing of the videos online.

On the audience side of the experience, many Festival participants were not experienced with technology, which was not surprising given their age as well as the reality of limited connectivity in a remote coastal community of fewer than 2,000 inhabitants.

The organizers made extensive efforts to provide technical support to any participant who needed it, while promoting the benefits of increasing awareness of and access to traditional wood carving practices through pre-recorded video and live video-conferencing formats. It was a labour-intensive process, but it was an opportunity to build the human relationships that have been so foundational to the success of the Festival. Bit by bit, these one-on-one conversations built up the sense of community support and trust that was needed for everyone to take a leap of faith in the digital format.

As an urbanite from Vancouver who transplanted to the remote coastal town of Tofino, Brianne's own journey as a digital communications and marketing professional provides important insight into what successful digitization looks like in a remote and Indigenous setting. For example, commonly accepted digital marketing practices assume that you are marketing to a sea of anonymous faces. In the case of the Carving on the Edge Festival, it is actually a tight-knit community with shared values and perspectives. In such a context, digital marketing is most effective when it reflects and amplifies the feelings and experiences of people who belong to that community.

The measures of success also needed to shift away from the number or frequency of posts to how effective each post was at fostering the kinds of relationships and connections upon which the Festival was founded. Exceptional care was taken to craft social media posts that appropriately used written, oral, and visual language to reflect the spirit of reconciliation within the local community. For example, some commonly used emojis have different meanings in an Indigenous context.

## The Financials: A variety of funding sources

The digital edition of the Festival had a budget of \$116,500, accounting for over 80% of the annual operating budget in other Festival years. The expenses break down as follows:

- Website redesign, software subscriptions (i.e., Zoom, MailChimp) - \$9,000
- Artist fees - \$37,000
- Artist expenses (supplies, travel, accomodation) - \$3,000
- Marketing - \$2,500
- Project coordination - \$32,000
- Administration - \$23,000
- Contractors (marketing, video production) - \$8,000
- Other costs (research, outreach, food, etc.) - \$2,000

The Festival was supported by a variety of funders, such as BC Arts Council, Department of Canadian Heritage, Clayoquot Biosphere Trust, Destination BC Tourism Events Program, Alberni Clayoquot Regional District, and Tourism Tofino. In a typical year, the Festival engages around 100 volunteers for planning, implementation, and evaluation, including the board members who contribute above and beyond to make it a success. In delivering the digital Festival, different skills were needed from volunteers, especially technological literacy and experience, which led to recruitment difficulties.

Festival registration is typically free, and subsidies are offered for workshops that do have a registration fee. For the digital edition, all Festival components were free, but the Festival had substantial fundraising success: the Festival raised about \$2,500 in donations compared to the \$700-\$1,000 that was typical for in-person editions. The fundraising success was thanks to registrants being redirected to a donation page right after their online registration was complete.

## The Impact: Strengthening pathways for cultural exchange and reconciliation

The knowledge and cultural exchange that result from the Carving on the Edge Festival are not always visible or quantifiable. Yet, they can be seen in the way Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants engage in meaningful exchange and dialogue that embody the spirit of reconciliation. They can also be seen in the way the youth connect and engage with Elders as an opportunity to heal from the intergenerational trauma caused by the colonial systems that continue to harm and marginalize Indigenous Peoples in Canada. The Festival offered an outlet for the people of Tofino to direct their energy to something deeply meaningful, which helped draw the support of local radio stations and newspapers.

What brought such a diverse group of people together was their shared passion for traditional wood carving -- a contemplative practice that is deeply connected to the land, and a tradition that has survived through intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

This deeply shared love of wood carving has fostered a spirit of reconciliation and a cultural pathway between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people across different generations in this little town at the end of all roads. It is this same spirit that made the digital edition of the Festival

so meaningful for everyone at a time when they needed to be in the company of each other the most, even when technology itself can be a barrier.

## **The Takeaways: Prioritize the human impact of digital experiences and take opportunities to do things differently**

There are a few important insights about how to develop our digital practices that can be gleaned from the Festival's experience:

- 1. Identify and prioritize the human impact of digital experiences.*  
When producing any digital experiences, it is critical to have a deep understanding of your audiences' values and to reflect them back in the design of the entire experience. Investing the time in advance that is needed to support individual contributors and participants should be part of the planning process. It can be considered an opportunity to increase understanding of the participants' level of comfort with, and access to, digital tools and devices.
- 2. Be mindful of the urban- and Western-centric nature of digital "best practices".*  
Best practices are an excellent place to start improving digital competency, but it is important to evaluate them critically, guided by an understanding of the target community. In particular, there are different "digital culture" norms. It is also important to pay attention to the way language, visuals, and other media are used by the target community to communicate digitally.
- 3. Innovation and resilience come from seeing and seizing opportunities to do things differently.*  
This involves taking the time to think about the "why" behind the digital approaches that an arts organization may have adopted and to consider whether they align with the community's values. Organizations should engage in regular reflection about their own digital practices. This process doesn't always come easily, but it can come more easily with practice.



## Curbside Museum: A simple idea that grew thanks to an effective collaboration

Story Seeker: Melanie Fernandez

People interviewed: Enza Apa (artist) and Nicole Fougère, artsPlace

Interview dates: July 29, 2021 and August 23, 2021

artsPlace is a community arts centre based in Canmore, Alberta that is proud to proclaim itself as “a phenomenal gathering ground”. Located in the Bow Valley, the centre offers residents and visitors a place to gather, discover, explore, and celebrate the arts and culture through classes, workshops, camps, live performances, films, exhibits, and community events. The centre houses a number of creative spaces, including a visual arts studio, ceramics studio, fabrication studio, the Hub Gallery, and a black box theatre.

artsPlace’s vision is of “a Bow Valley in which all residents participate in the arts and appreciate creativity as a vital part of their daily lives.” The centre is dedicated to storytelling through a variety of media, and works to actively engage residents and visitors with the stories.



artsPlace hosted artist Enza Apa's travelling exhibition "Good Luck/Bad Luck/Who Knows?", which got its start in Canmore as a quiet intervention and installation project in its pandemic initiative, [Curbside Museum](#). The Curbside Museum's website notes that it is,

*a small exhibition space tucked in a fence along a public sidewalk.... Exhibitions at this micro museum explore ideas both large and small, on subjects factual or fictional, and range from the whimsical to the serious, with no limits except what fits within the museum itself. Founded in 2017 and curated by Enza Apa, the Curbside Museum is an ongoing project with new exhibits every 7-8 weeks. The Curbside Museum is open every day, all day.*

## The Innovation: Moving the inside out

The Curbside Museum was conceived by artist Enza Apa as a way to engage with her neighbourhood. With a background in museology and exhibit design, Enza wanted to challenge the museum construct and make everyday objects and stories "precious". What started as a small personal project outside her home grew into a larger community-engaged project through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts' [Travelling Exhibition Program](#) (TREX), which facilitates curation and travelling exhibitions throughout Alberta.



Through the TREX program, Curator Danielle Ribar from the Art Gallery of Grande Prairie collaborated with Enza, a multidisciplinary artist, to put together a new exhibition and a newly constructed museum. The "Good Luck/Bad Luck/Who Knows?" exhibition traveled alongside photos of prior thematic explorations and associated art objects.

When the travelling exhibition returned to her hometown of Canmore, Enza was keen to work with artsPlace to create educational programs and community engagement opportunities, but the COVID-19 pandemic hampered these plans. Enza worked with community members to create 10 exhibits in the Curbside Museum project while her exhibition of thematic photos was installed in the artsPlace main gallery inside the building.

Through her prior museological work and conversations, Enza noted that community members easily grasp the idea of "collections" and often dream of having their own museums. She believes that the simplicity of the Curbside Museum idea is what brings gravity to it. artsPlace deepened the engagement around the project by creating [video materials](#) and other supports. Enza was very pleased that the project returned to her home community and credits artsPlace for their open and engaged approaches and willingness for exploration during the pandemic. Accompanying the exhibitions were programs such as "story tours/walking tours". Enza is proud

to say that the “Curbside Museum is the only museum that was open in Western Canada during the pandemic”.

## **The Challenge: Working in outdoor spaces**



Enza faced significant challenges related to creating exhibits in outdoor spaces. For example, summer heat and winter cold have severe impacts on installations, lighting, and other technical aspects. She tested ideas to see what would work and what would endure weather conditions and other challenges related to exhibits in public space.

She also found the exhibition schedule demanding due to the continuous turnover and is considering extending the exhibition run periods so there are fewer exhibitions per year.

## **The Financials: An idea that grew from artist to institution**

The exhibitions were self-funded until Enza’s application to the Travelling Exhibition Program successfully secured funding for the project for a three-year period. During this time, the project travelled around the province, including to small and rural communities.

Subsequent to the TREX funding, the [Town of Canmore's Building Neighbourhoods Project](#) provided support for the Curbside Museum, as well as eight other community projects.

Although the project did not directly generate much revenue, the installations and accompanying public engagement programming garnered significant public attention which was an advantage at a time when all public arts and cultural spaces remained closed. The curator and Enza hope that the project increased awareness of the institutions that hosted the exhibitions.



## The Takeaway: A simple yet poignantly personal idea

During the pandemic, many people have struggled with issues related to isolation, anxiety, and mental and physical health. Enza's Curbside Museum project enabled people to dream about their own collections, stories, and histories that illustrate their preciousness. With artsPlace, Enza was able to "play" with the notion of a museum and everyday objects. Enza hoped to "gift" the quiet installations to the community through the small interventions.

artsPlace was able to collaborate with the artist to expand the reach of the idea and make the Curbside Museum accessible through its public programming. The Town of Canmore supported community engagement through public art during the pandemic.

As noted in Enza's Artist Statement:

*There was no set agenda or theme for the exhibition, which makes each display feel like a tiny glimpse into the personal world of its creator. It's an opportunity to "see" people up close, especially at a time where that friendly intimacy and connection isn't always possible.*

*So, stay awhile, lean in close, and take a peek to warm your soul.*

# Dancemakers' Liveness Residency: Pushing the medium of livestream

Story Seeker: Blanche Israël

People interviewed: Luke Garwood, computer programmer and contemporary dancer; Brodie Stevenson, Board Chair

Interviews held: July 15 and August 3, 2021

**Dancemakers** is a community-led dance organization that focuses on the research and development of dance creators and provides them with a range of resources that promote innovation in their practice and the development of new performance works.

In March 2021, with the organization in the midst of [a major transition](#), Dancemakers invited dancer and computer programmer Luke Garwood to undertake a week-long artist residency to explore dance creation within livestream as a medium in and of itself. Luke and his three collaborators (artist and OCAD University Assistant Professor Immony Men, choreographer Heidi Strauss, and dancer Dedra McDermott) spent the residency testing performance techniques, new software tools for digital manipulation, and state-of-the-art equipment. The goal was to explore and use a variety of different tools to make livestreaming more worthwhile and engaging for both audiences and performers.

## The Innovation: Leading-edge technology and a process-oriented approach

During the residency, the artists used many innovative techniques and leading-edge tools in their explorative process, such as motion capture, digital manipulation, projection, high-quality film cameras, and interactive visual programming languages for multimedia content. The artistic team was able to experiment with the very notion of “live” and effectively extend the definition of dance, making it “less about the form of the body and more about its movement”, as Luke explained.

The team worked with the dancers' performances in real time, applying digital effects, filters, and manipulations. Luke noted that, “as you are programming, you are doing that in real time, so your choices as a VJ [video jockey] of sorts are also a big part of the livestream”. When programmers projected a live broadcast feed in the studio, dancers were able to improvise responses to their own digitally captured movements. Through the interactions between the digital tools and the dancers, a conversation emerged between the digital and the analog manifestations of physical movement. Luke noted that, “as a performer, as a dancer, if I am watching myself transformed into these digital things, I am no longer necessarily tied only to my corporal body - I am extended into this digital manipulated space”.

For audience members who viewed the livestream, the programmers needed to find ways to effectively communicate what was and was not digitally manipulated. Luke noted that they often did so by working with picture-in-picture visual representation: “If it’s a screen, we can ... have the dancer in the top right-hand corner, then the rest of [the screen] showing their effect on [the manipulated digital image], so people can understand that it’s coming from a body.”



Even though Luke and his collaborators used advanced tools that might seem futuristic and unfamiliar to many artists, one of the most innovative parts of the residency was its orientation toward process rather than product. For Luke, process-oriented work allows artists to “be more experimental without worrying about a finished piece”. By contrast, when innovation is product-oriented, Luke believes that it often becomes about “the lowest common denominator of [the equipment] the audiences have. A cap gets put on things as soon as you talk about audiences interacting with it.”

## **The Challenge: Organizational uncertainty**

The residency was programmed during a challenging time for Dancemakers, which had been without artistic leadership for about a year. In November 2020, the board of directors announced plans to shutter the organization. Artistic Producer Natasha Powell joined the organization with a mandate to wind it down, while using its remaining resources for residencies and other activities, which allowed her to program the Liveness residency.

In response to community outcry and a petition with nearly 300 signatures, a new board was convened on February 1, 2021 with the goal of preserving the organization and “honouring Natasha’s programming if she wanted us to”, said its new Chair Brodie Stevenson.

The timing of this organizational change caused uncertainty and delays in the Liveness residency. As such, the residency was not designed to be repeated or have any long-term outcomes, and the artists could not count on future development beyond the week of residency that they spent together.

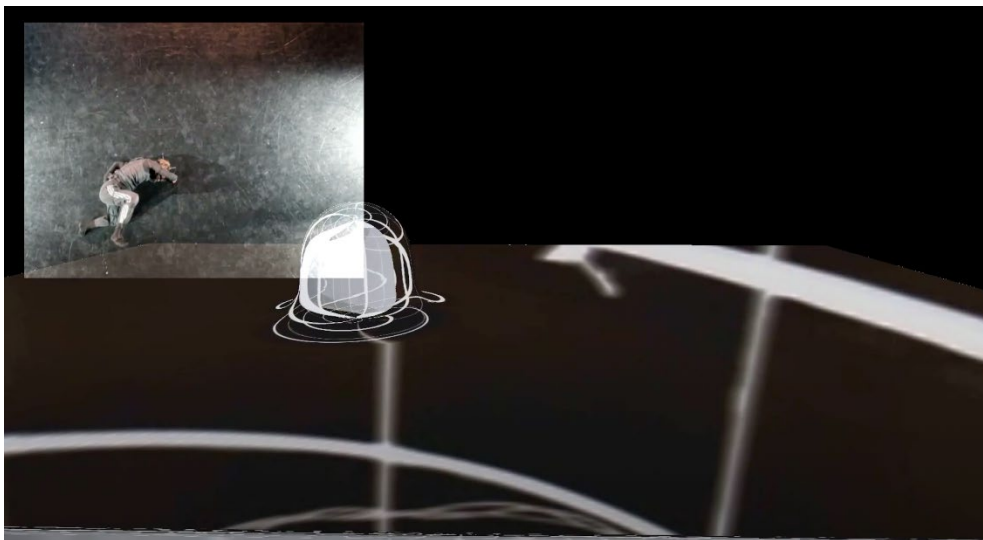
## The Financials: Long-standing core funding and a key partnership

Thanks in part to its 46-year history of valuable work in the dance community, Dancemakers benefits from core funding from all levels of government. As such, the organization had funding for residency projects, which are a core component of its mandate. The participating artists were paid by Dancemakers, but revenue generation was not a key motivator, given the organizational transition that was underway.

The artistic team was able to access leading-edge equipment thanks to a partnership with the Public Visualization Lab at OCAD University. According to [its website](#), the “Public Visualization Lab focuses on how visualization can operate as a critical design and media practice.” As co-director of the Lab, Immony Men was able to contribute equipment to the residency that would have been too expensive to purchase for a one-week residency. For example, motion capture suits cost up to \$3,000 each.

Dancemakers received the Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy and the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy during the time of the residency, but not directly for that work. Nevertheless, having that financial support in place provided enough administrative support to allow the organization to program the residency.

The Liveness residency may have a longer-term financial impact at Dancemakers. The new governance team is hoping to use the learnings from the residency (e.g., footage and other documentation) to strengthen its case for preserving its core funding.



## The Takeaway: Innovation as a return to the source

Luke emerged from the week-long residency with a renewed sense of optimism about livestreaming, despite some initial skepticism: “I was seeing livestreaming being used in a lazy way - people thinking they can replace the audience with a camera and just project it out to a screen.” Since Luke had never personally done a livestream before, he thought, “I can’t criticize this without putting my money where my mouth is and trying.” Reflecting on the residency, he feels that “there is a lot to be mined from [livestreaming]. The goal was to use everything it can provide. My hope is that people see the potential to think about livestreaming in a different way.”

By exploring new processes, new dissemination models, and new definitions of dance in the digital realm, Dancemakers is forging a path for the next generation of dance artists. “There is a whole younger generation [of dancers] that doesn’t necessarily want to tour,” explained Brodie. This generational shift implies a major change in the dance world, one that could lead to greater separation between process (creative exploration for its own sake) and product (an audience-oriented, polished final piece). Brodie went so far as to state that he believes that a decoupling of process and product will be a key outcome of the pandemic.

The residency also uncovered new insights about audience behaviour as well as technical elements related to audiovisual quality and compression. Regarding audience behaviour, Luke noted that “people are much more likely to watch if we interrupt their Facebook feed, as opposed to sending out links to something”. On the technical side, the team identified ways to incorporate motion data that did not require expensive equipment like motion capture suits. “There are very interesting capabilities in machine learning to capture motion data to be captured from [simple] video”, said Luke, noting that anyone with a smartphone or digital camera can access and apply these machine learning capabilities to video content that captures movement.

Despite the knowledge gained from the residency, Luke remained “nervous about using the word innovative”. Often, he said, what we think of as innovative is actually a return to the source - to “see commonality between things that might otherwise seem like they are coming from different worlds. The innovation comes from this jigsawing together of different spaces.”

## Eastern Front Theatre: “Micro digitals, macro impact”

Story Seeker: Blanche Israël

Person interviewed: Kat McCormack, Artistic Director and General Manager

Interview held: July 27, 2021

Eastern Front Theatre (EFT) is a small theatre company in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia founded in 1993 to support the work of Atlantic Canadian playwrights. At the height of the pandemic, EFT developed three short-term goals: to help theatre artists get paid, to seize the opportunity to work on theatre in the digital realm, and to create content that was free and accessible to everyone. To accomplish these goals, EFT created and implemented the Micro Digitals project, through which 36 theatre artists from across Atlantic Canada attempted to translate the essence of live theatre into 60-second micro digital experiences. Projects included audio, video, text, song, puppetry, comedy, poetry, animation, and hologram.



### The Innovation: Prioritizing accessibility at every stage

Access was a core value of EFT’s Micro Digitals project at both the creation and dissemination stages. Through the initiative, EFT was able to work with more theatre artists from across Atlantic Canada than ever before, explore a new, more accessible and compact creation and dissemination format, and give artists more agency to build accessibility supports into their creative process.

To ensure that artists could make the most of the program during a difficult time, EFT designed an application process that required just a two- to three-sentence description of the proposed theatre project. “We didn’t want anyone to feel like they wasted their time or were asked to do too much,” said Artistic Director and General Manager Kat McCormack. EFT accepted applications from any kind of theatre artist, not just from playwrights. “The impetus was very much to get creators creating - to put money in their hands, and to let theatre artists work on whatever they wanted to,” she noted. “The focus was on the artists.”

The response was, as Kat put it, “kind of huge for us”: 75 applications from actors, playwrights, sound designers, costume and set designers, and other theatre-adjacent artists from across Atlantic Canada, with 60-70% self-identifying as artists from communities that are currently underrepresented in Canadian theatre, including artists who are Deaf or disabled; identify as Indigenous, Black, or people of colour; live with mental health disorders or chronic illnesses; are immigrants; or identify as transgender or queer.

EFT also saw the Micro Digitals project as an opportunity to increase its own accessibility and reach, thereby meeting a significant organizational challenge: to work with theatre artists from across Atlantic Canada, which spans four provinces across more than 500,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Kat and her team met with each of the 75 applicants to learn about their projects and explore potential future collaborations. “This was a great opportunity to reach out and [...] meet the people we were meant to be serving - even if we couldn’t commission them, we could make connections and hopefully try to give people something no matter what.” If synergies became apparent, connections were facilitated between artists through what Kat called the “Atlantic Canadian buddy system - putting people together who had never met before who seemed to have complementary ways of working” in order to encourage collaboration on certain projects.

Twenty projects involving a total of 36 artists were retained for production. In terms of out-of-pocket costs beyond staff time, Kat indicated that it was “a really cheap way to have a high impact in the community at large.”

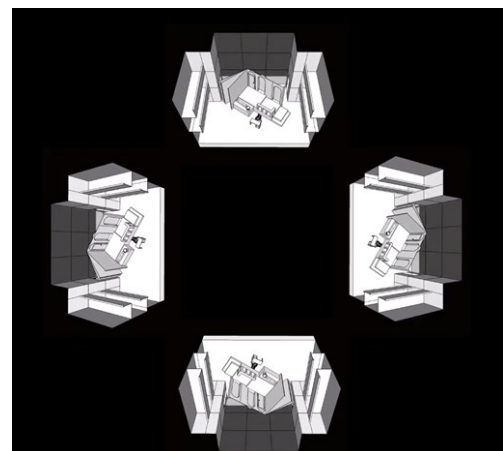
At the dissemination stage, EFT wanted to ensure that the works themselves were accessible and approachable to all kinds of audiences. The ultra-compact format was disseminated for free on EFT’s website and social media accounts. “One minute was a good size for that -- some social media platforms have one-minute limits,” Kat pointed out. Access for Deaf and disabled audiences was a key focus, with one artist overseeing accessibility efforts. EFT worked with the artists to make sure that every work had accessibility elements, such as captions and described audio. Like many arts organizations, Eastern Front does not have metrics on the audiences who viewed the works.

## **The Challenges: Adapting to new ways of working, juggling multiple commissions**

Working with different types of artists and managing so many commissioned works at once was a learning curve for Kat and her team. As a dramaturgy-focused company, EFT typically develops the work of playwrights and presents just one or two full productions per year. “We were not just working with one artist on one script. We had twenty projects on the go; everything had to happen much quicker. The projects were smaller, but because there were so many of them, it required a lot on our end, on the administrative side.... This was such a new way of working for us,” said Kat.

Kat was new in her role as Artistic Director and General Manager, a position that had gone unfilled at EFT for more than six months. “It was weird for me, because it was my very first project with EFT,” she noted. This meant that she spent a lot of time figuring out creative processes and working closely with the artists.

With artists’ well-being a central consideration, EFT adapted to each artist’s preferred way of working, even inviting them to set their own deadlines. It was eye-opening for Kat to see artists who faced roadblocks





apologize and assume that the company would not want to accommodate their needs. “At least twice, there were artists with disabilities who said, ‘I can’t do this right now. If you don’t want to work with me because of my disability, I understand.’” Kat made a point of accommodating as many different ways of working as possible: “I never wanted anyone to be stressed out over what should be a thrilling and fun little project.”

## **The Financials: Opening up possibilities for future revenues**

The Micro Digitals project was designed to embody EFT’s mission of supporting Atlantic Canadian creators, not to create a new revenue stream for the company. “We just happened to have money lying around, which was enough for a \$500 honorarium for 20 projects.” EFT didn’t necessarily maximize every funding opportunity, because the time and effort to do so would have significantly delayed the project. “With the announcement I had gotten the job, we announced the [Micro Digitals] project,” said Kat. “If we had been on top of things, we would have had a sponsor, written some grants. But we didn’t have much of a chance to do much.”

Nevertheless, the success of the Micro Digitals project has led to the development of a new but related initiative called Macro Digitals. For Kat, “the goal is to do it again, but to do four projects with five co-collaborators each that would be longer or larger in scope.” The rich digital content that emerged from the Micro Digitals project will serve as a strong proof-of-concept for grant and sponsorship applications for this upcoming initiative.

## **The Takeaways: Greater impact on artists, transferable lessons**

Through the Micro Digitals project, EFT found an effective way to support the work of Atlantic Canadian theatre artists. “We were able to consider how we could boost the careers of so many more people, rather than just one playwright a year,” said Kat. EFT significantly expanded its contacts in each of the Atlantic provinces.

EFT played a new and valuable role as matchmaker, setting artists up to meet and explore collaborations with each other based on complementary ways of working. According to Kat, “small things can have a larger impact in terms of being able to show off the talent and the ingenuity of Atlantic Canadian artists. Those opportunities don’t come around that often on the East Coast.”

The digital exploration involved in producing the Micro Digitals project helped the company adjust to an unexpected change in plans. With restrictions easing in Nova Scotia, EFT’s annual Stages Theatre Festival was set to go ahead with in-person shows until an unexpected lockdown was announced at the end of April. Thanks to EFT’s experience with the Micro Digitals project, said Kat, “we already had a better idea of how people were going to engage with online content. One of the things we took away from [the Micro Digitals project] was that people would watch things on their own timeline.” EFT incorporated this learning into the design of the Stages Theatre Festival, making content available on demand rather than in a livestream format.

EFT’s biggest learning was how to create accessible content for online consumption. “If you commission something that is going to be online, you have to ask for a transcript from the artist,” cautioned Kat. An artist’s transcript can be used to pull image descriptions, captions, and



descriptive text. A transcript can also increase the faithfulness of the accessibility supports that accompany creative works. “It would have saved me a lot of time if we had done that.” Without the artist’s input, the administrative team had to perform a lot of time-consuming tasks and engage in some guesswork.

The Micro Digitals project helped EFT develop as an organization during a challenging time. Kat summed it up this way: “It was ultimately uplifting and really inspirational, for me even. It has helped us now look forward in a new way.”

# The Festival of Literary Diversity: Nimble and expansive thinking

Story Seeker: Blanche Israël

Person interviewed: Jael Richardson, Executive Director and Founder

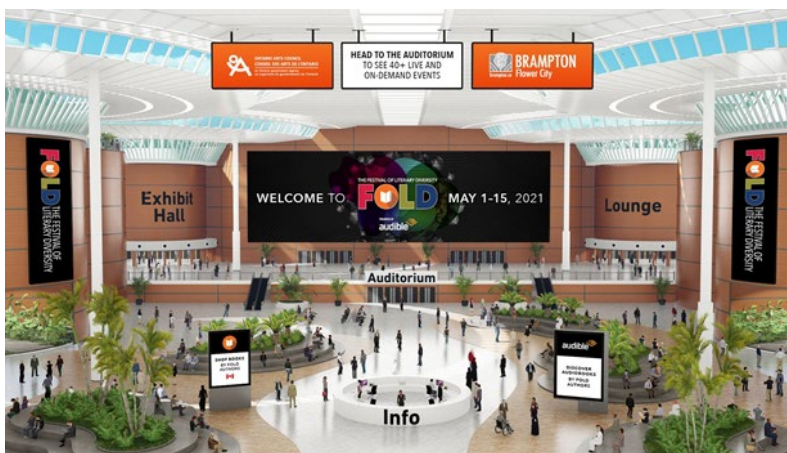
Interview held: September 22, 2021

Held annually in Brampton, Ontario since 2016, the [Festival of Literary Diversity](#) (FOLD) is Canada's first festival devoted to celebrating underrepresented authors and storytellers. The FOLD provides one-of-a-kind events for kids and adults that engage readers, inspire writers, and empower educators by highlighting important voices in literature.

The FOLD's annual festival is held in late April and early May. When the pandemic hit in March 2020, the FOLD Executive Director and Founder Jael Richardson and her team were poised with full plans ready to go for an in-person festival, including live events for more than 1,000 attendees and a full roster of guest authors flying in from around the world. While many other festivals opted to cancel, the FOLD quickly transitioned to a virtual festival in May. For both its 2020 and 2021 editions, the Festival carefully researched and adopted the latest software, used creativity in its program design, and centred audiences in its decisions, which has made the FOLD a leader to emulate in the literary industry.

## The Innovation: Forging ahead with both creative and business innovations

The 2020 festival's pivot to Zoom occurred over a matter of weeks, in part because the communities that the FOLD served were also the most impacted by COVID-19. "Because we focus on marginalized communities, we knew if there were vulnerable communities involved, we couldn't hold it for some and exclude others," said Jael. "So we decided very quickly to move to virtual."



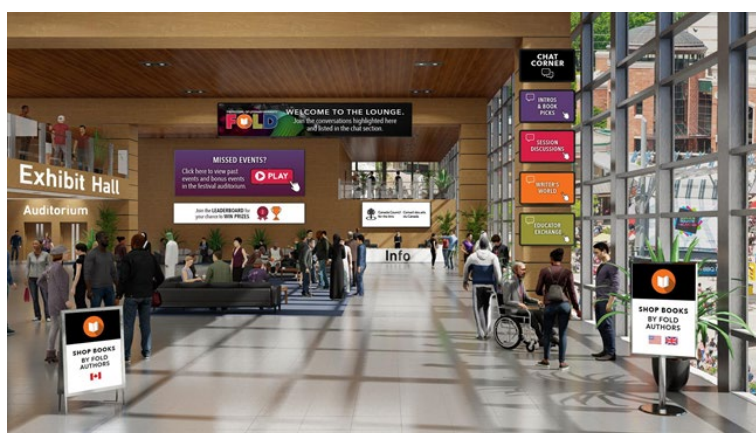
Their shift to digital required a steep learning curve that ultimately set a new bar for virtual literary festivals.

In 2020, the FOLD's main goals were to uphold the festival's values and to learn and adapt on the fly. "That first year, we tried to think about our priorities and figure out how to support our authors during a difficult time," said Jael. The team's decision-making was guided by the desire to support artists at a time when many summer and fall festivals were already cancelling all their

programming. “At the time that we did it, no one was doing their events,” said Jael. “We were the only literary festival that launched with live events virtually.”

By the following year, the FOLD had acquired the software, support, and knowledge it needed to develop a sleek and carefully curated online experience. Wanting something more sophisticated and customizable than Zoom, the FOLD turned to more specialized options on the market. “I was researching a whole bunch of platforms,” Jael recalled. “I became very obsessed with getting it right.” Jael and her team treated their search as if they were making decisions about an in-person event, using what they would normally spend on their venue as a budget for the online platform. They settled on a highly customizable option called [vFairs](#), which is based out of India. The FOLD, which had previously been free, started charging for the festival experience but still managed to maintain attendance levels while allowing for greater accessibility, reach, and community safety.

Book sales are a big part of any literary festival. In 2020, with conflicting reports about the possibility of transmitting COVID-19 by mail, “we struggled to know if we should even be encouraging book sales,” recalled Jael. In 2021, however, when the risk of transmission via shipping was known to be minimal, supporting the literary market became a major focus. “A big question in the



industry is how to get people to buy books online the same way they buy books in person,” said Jael. The FOLD worked with Another Story Bookshop, a local independent bookstore that could not afford to compete with online sales giants by offering free shipping to its customers. The FOLD covered the store’s shipping costs within Canada for the duration of the festival and offered festival swag bags to further incentivize book purchases.

## **The Challenges: Online social safety, shifts in audience behaviour, and funder pushback**

While Jael was proud of what the FOLD accomplished in May 2020, not everything went smoothly. “It was a hot mess of transition,” she said. The organizers were learning how to manage Zoom events as they went along, making them particularly vulnerable to online trolling and socially disruptive behaviours. “We didn’t know how to close the chat, we didn’t know how to go into webinar mode,” Jael recalled. Improving the festival’s ability to minimize safety issues was a critical concern addressed as the FOLD moved to a new platform in 2021.

Audience behaviours evolved rapidly as the pandemic wore on, which caused some programming challenges. Jael noted that “it was hard to know how people would actually consume the content”. One learning from the 2021 Festival is that many attendees were interested in consuming the content retroactively - on-demand rather than live. The festival had

avoided programming anything concurrently so that participants could view everything live, but Jael now feels that this may not have been necessary. Because the vFairs platform charges by the day, “you could save money if you do fewer days and offer more sessions in a day, with not all of them live,” Jael noted.

The FOLD did receive some pushback from its funders about choosing a virtual platform that was not Canadian. From Jael’s perspective, however, vFairs was the platform that was most aligned with the Festival’s mission: “yes, they are international, but 90% of the staff are people of colour. So the funders are looking at it as being one thing, and I am looking at it as being another.” While local platforms were explored, Jael noted that these competitors didn’t return their calls or didn’t understand the FOLD’s mission as well as vFairs did.

## **The Financials: Maintaining funder confidence and developing new revenue streams**

In May 2020, with the sudden cancellation of airline and hotel bookings, the FOLD had an opportunity to increase its honoraria for authors. However, there was concern that granting organizations would ask for the budgeted travel money to be returned, so the FOLD put a lot of thought into how to make a case for a virtual festival redesign that would maximize and reallocate the available and budgeted resources. “We wanted to hold onto as much money as possible - this was a rare opportunity for us to spread money around in a different way,” said Jael. That creative thinking paid off in the long term, as funders were interested in investing in organizations who were developing innovative approaches that kept artists working through the pandemic. “Funders want to see that you are innovating,” Jael noted. “We were leaders in this area and will need to ask for more in the future to figure out things for other [festivals] to copy.”



In 2021, the FOLD developed two new revenue streams while maintaining its funding from book publishers and government sources, including the City of Brampton. First, the FOLD started to

sell T-shirts and sweatshirts. Second, the FOLD decided to charge an admission fee. Going virtual had allowed the festival to grow from 1,000 live attendees in 2019 to 5,000 unique attendees at the free virtual festival in 2020. In 2021, “attendees had to pay \$30, and still we had 4,000 unique attendees. It was a whole new income stream for the festival,” said Jael.

Though it was financially advantageous, the decision to charge admission was made in large part as a crowd-control measure. “If they pay, you can track them and trace them, and respond in kind.” For Jael, seeing that audiences felt the festival experience was worth paying for was a huge lesson. “We hemmed and hawed about it being paid. Financially, it puts up a barrier, but in my experience, people are more likely to come to paid events than free events, and the turnout is a lot more predictable.” Jael noted that there are still ways for community members who don’t have the means to attend the FOLD for free, such as the Festival’s Patron Pass Program, which provides a festival pass to readers and writers who may not otherwise be able to attend a literary festival.

## **The Takeaways: Responsiveness and accessibility**

Jael believes that the pandemic was an opportunity for organizations like the FOLD to become more nimble. As a young organization, the FOLD embraced the shift to business models that blur the traditional divide between the for-profit sector’s values of growth and customer responsiveness and the not-for-profit sector’s community focus. “Corporations always have to adapt to what customers are doing, where and when they are doing it. [Not-for-profit organizations] often delay that,” said Jael. “If you are interested in growth, you have to pay attention and respond.” She noted that literature has had an advantage over other artforms during the pandemic due to its flexibility: “live events, music, dance, theatre - those are really hard to duplicate in a virtual space. Reading had a better time: book sales were up.”

For Jael, it was clear from the first virtual festival that an online offering will be an essential part of the FOLD’s programming in the future. What the Festival was able to achieve virtually aligns with its accessibility values. “Something important has happened during the pandemic: it has made everything become more accessible virtually,” said Jael. The FOLD was able to reach up to five times more people because it was virtual. “I think it is going to increase our budget, but for the right reasons - to reach more people.” That being said, Jael is cautious not to assume that this expansion is limitless. “In terms of numbers, our audiences are still largely Canadian, with most attendees from Toronto. But we had big bursts from Vancouver and Ottawa, people who would have never been able to come to the FOLD before.”



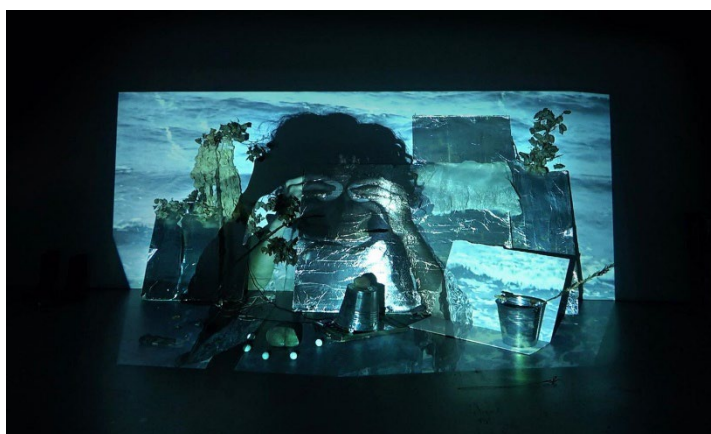
## Fille de foin/Hay Girl, a bold partnership between Laïla Mestari and the LOBE artist centre

Story Seeker: Myriam Benzakour-Durand

Person interviewed: Laïla Mestari

Interview date: June 21, 2021

A Montreal-based artist born in Casablanca, Morocco, Laïla Mestari is enthusiastic about the dialogue between the visual and the performing arts. Her artistic practice is diverse and includes photography, textile works, art installations, video performances, and drawing. Her latest project, *Fille de foin/Hay Girl*, was selected by the LOBE artist centre in Chicoutimi and was staged in the midst of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when all artistic activities were at a standstill. Each year



the LOBE centre invites a curator who selects artists and accompanies them throughout their creative projects. Contrary to traditional commissions, in which artists create the works and curators decide how to present them, the LOBE centre offers experimental commissions, which means the guest artists are accompanied throughout the entire creation process.

The partnership between Laïla and the LOBE artist centre is an example of audacity, resilience, and passion-driven work, which allowed the project to adapt to the exceptional circumstances imposed by the health measures.

### The Challenge: Presenting art in the midst of a pandemic

As the LOBE team prepared to welcome Laïla to the gallery in November 2020, the pandemic situation in Chicoutimi was extremely tense, and the health regulations were frequently changing. Artist centres were in some cases considered commercial venues, and cultural venues in others. As a result, it was difficult to keep up with the regulations. Several times Laïla thought she was going to lose her contract with the LOBE centre because even the team didn't know if they were allowed to work. When her contacts at the artist centre told Laïla that her exhibition would be cancelled because she wasn't considered "essential", she became upset and challenged them to be more bold.

*Things were really ambiguous at that point in time. And artist centres have to go strictly by the book since they receive public funding. I told them, 'I totally understand that you don't want to get in trouble, but come on, it's really sad to tell artists to stay home because of one line in a law that says art isn't essential'.*

In the end, after a discussion with the board of directors, the centre's team found a way to change Laïla's status from artist to essential worker so that she could have access to the gallery to work. They allocated additional funds for housing and car rentals to ensure that the artist was almost completely self-isolated.

## **The Innovation: Pushing the boundaries for ways to exhibit art**

Both the artist and the organization adapted to the situation with regard to the creation process, their working method, and their budget. The real innovation, however, was the way in which both parties set up the exhibition for viewing – how could they allow the public to view an exhibition without going into the gallery?

Four solutions made the presentation of the project possible:

- The first step was to choose the artistic medium—in this case, video. Knowing that the participants couldn't enter the gallery, Laïla felt that video creation would be the best option. She created a video installation with a vantage point outside the centre so that it would be visible through the window. Everything inside the gallery was displayed as if the window were an image of a three-dimensional collage in a shadow box. Video lent itself well to this project since people were invited to visit at night to see the lights from the televisions and projectors through the window, which made things seem to emanate from within. In addition, knowing that people wouldn't be able to hear the video (in compliance with health measures), Laïla didn't invest any time on sound design. Throughout the entire creation process, she adapted to the limitations of what was going to be seen.
- To give more visibility to the work, the LOBE centre contacted an advertising company to rent display space for two images on a billboard. The lighted image displayed on a major boulevard was tied to the exhibition in the gallery.
- They joined forces with the public library team, which was also operating in a limited capacity – library users could only order books through the Internet and pick them up. The library team offered their unused space for a television and a video screening through the window looking out onto a public space. These video projections were also tied to the exhibition in the gallery.
- Lastly, a small print magazine created for the exhibition was distributed on site, as well as at fairs and exhibitions in France and Germany.



The collaboration between the artist and the centre ensured maximum visibility: not only did Laïla create an exhibition that could reach the public more easily, but the centre's team also found original new ways to set up and promote an exhibition.

## The Financials: Artist's fees and artistic development

As an artist, Laïla is always looking for career opportunities, events that are at least somewhat profitable, and financially viable experiences that are sources of inspiration and creativity. Her residency with the LOBE centre was an opportunity that definitely paid off on several levels – with the artist's fees for the exhibition plus the technical and professional experience she acquired. The support from the technical team allowed her to further her artistic abilities, enhance her portfolio, create professional works, and apply for a master's degree at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she was accepted for the fall.

By giving emerging artists a professional framework, a support team, and a curator who is an established artist, the LOBE centre helps artists in their professional development, a service that truly benefitted Laïla.

## The Takeaways : Audacity, new opportunities, flexible artistic practices, going beyond the comfort zone

Laïla was bold enough to challenge the organization to find ingenious and previously untested solutions for exhibiting art in their city, at a time when virtually everything was closed. This experience helped her realize that artists have a responsibility to push the boundaries imposed on them, to take risks. “Plenty of my artist friends went through similar situations during the pandemic. After this experience, I told them, ‘Shake them up! Because if you don’t, we have nothing.’”

Laïla and the LOBE team were very pleased with the new opportunities that they developed thanks to the constraints imposed on them. The connections they made with the advertising agent and the Chicoutimi library team are ongoing relationships with the community that will be useful in the future. The experience was beneficial for everyone involved. It was advantageous for Laïla to have a flexible artistic practice, with the use of multiple media. Her *Fille de foin/Hay Girl* project was extremely adaptable to the exceptional circumstances of COVID-19.

By moving the exhibition outside the gallery and exhibiting it through the window of the public library and on a billboard, Laïla went outside her comfort zone. As a visible minority in a city with very few racialized people, she was uncomfortable putting her image in a public space. She realized that for her, the artist centre was a safe space, where the presentation of her art was supported by the vision and legitimacy of the place.

*I was a bit uncomfortable, but I also observed that there were no consequences. Because these are fears based on the past and on prejudices. It's a mix of prejudices and experiences. But I am really happy to have done it.*

The partnership between the LOBE artist centre and Laïla showed that with a bit of audacity and a lot of work, possibilities multiply. As Laïla said, “You have to take risks instead of saying that it's not possible to do things like we always have. You have to be bold and try things that have never been done before.”



## The Fredericton Playhouse's InterMISSION Residency Program: Respond first, finetune later

Story Seeker: Blanche Israël

People interviewed: Julie Friddell, Development Director and Lesandra Dodson, Director of Programming

Interview held: September 16, 2021

New Brunswick's [Fredericton Playhouse](#) is a professional performing arts venue. Primarily a presenter, the Playhouse typically hosts local, national, and international artists and companies. The Playhouse also produces its own professional series and offers education and outreach programming.

In June 2020, with touring at a standstill and the venue sitting dark, Director of Programming Lesandra Dodson realized that the organization had an opportunity to focus on one of its non-public-facing strategic initiatives: to bridge gaps with New Brunswick artists and get more artists creating on the stage.

In the past, the residency program provided artists access to the theatre space and amenities, along with grant writing and administrative support for their projects. The idea to create a more expansive and formalized residency program was informed by Lesandra's past experience as a choreographer who had done two ad hoc dance residencies at the Playhouse.

The new program, called InterMISSION, was designed to support artists and technicians by offering them paid opportunities to make use of the Playhouse facilities, in order to create and collaborate safely under pandemic restrictions. The Playhouse funded 13 artist development residency projects that animated the venue from September 2020 to March 2021. Residency topics included:

- explorations of dance and theatre through film;
- workshops of new musical compositions including public performances of a new musical;
- filmed live rock performances with projection art; an exploration of musical improvisation through site-specific acoustics;
- an audiovisual life story; and
- the digitization of a wind ensemble.

"I felt like it was such a beautiful cross-section of everything in our artistic community," Lesandra reflected. "Giving them a space to create in, especially in a time like this, was very special."

## The Innovations: Paying artists directly, a special campaign, and a digital focus

Though the Playhouse had hosted residencies before, they were typically informal - the result of an artist approaching the Director of Programming with a specific idea in mind. “Before the pandemic, it was sort of under the table, it was not known to the community,” said Lesandra. “COVID formalized everything for us.” The organization had never been directly involved in a structured artist residency program in which artists got paid directly from the project, but they had often helped artists secure funding and given them access to the Playhouse’s facilities for such projects.



InterMISSION resulted in lots of opportunities for artists, as recounted by Development Director Julie Friddell: “we ended up hiring and paying over 50 artists - not only the artists doing the residencies in the building, but also the videographers doing digital documentation, as well as our own staff.” In addition to the artists engaged, the diverse residencies involved seven mentors, six videographers and sound experts, three full-time or contract technical personnel that the Playhouse was able to bring back after temporary layoffs.

Offering video documentation as part of the artist residencies was an important added value in the context of the pandemic, both for the artists and for the Fredericton Playhouse. Artists came away from their residencies with valuable digital content that they could use to promote and share

their work and to put together a press package. The Playhouse’s achievements with the residencies should help the venue raise money from donors and government funders.

## The Challenge: Growing an auxiliary program without setting an impossible precedent

Lesandra noted that the Playhouse's focus is normally on purchasing and presenting public-facing performing arts shows:

*We are a presenter. We are a venue. We have to stay focused on what we are in the community and what we provide because we are the biggest presenter in the community. That is what we do, and no one else is really doing that here. We have to stay focused on who we are and what our mission is.*

Despite the successes of the InterMISSION residency program, the Playhouse knew that, due to staff and venue capacity, they would not be able to replicate the program at the same scale once artists' touring resumed at pre-pandemic levels.

While the 2020-2021 residencies allowed the Playhouse to keep technicians employed, Lesandra was mindful about not overloading them in the future with a large-scale residency program. "You don't want people to then be burnt out," said Lesandra. "Technicians' hours are crazy."

Regarding venue capacity, she noted the importance of striking a balance between maximizing the use of the space by programming residencies during quieter months like August and January, while also allowing for important repairs and work on the theatre that normally needs to happen during those periods. "I think it's about finding a happy medium. If we can manage to do both well on a continual basis and not burn people out, great."

As a presenter, the Playhouse would normally consider direct payments to artists to be out of scope. They opted to make an exception in the context of the pandemic because the InterMISSION project came together quickly, and there was no time to apply for and wait to hear back from grants. "Moving forward, we will have a greater lead time," said Lesandra. "We won't pay the \$100/day but we will provide the space, professional technicians, and help if the artists want grant writing support and support letters."

## The Financials: A targeted fundraising campaign and emergency grants

The residency project was innovative for the Playhouse on the financial front, as it involved a dedicated private donation campaign. Beyond an annual donation drive, said Julie, “we had never done a separate, really targeted campaign. That was brand new.”

Julie was delighted to see the organization bring in \$12,500 in private donations from this brand new revenue stream while increasing community goodwill toward the Playhouse via the InterMISSION initiative. Lesandra attributed the success of the campaign in part to an increase in community concern and support for the local arts community during the pandemic. Fredericton Playhouse patrons were also invited to reallocate their ticket refunds as a donation to the campaign, which many opted to do.

One of the projects hosted by the residency was led by a high-profile Broadway performer and included three public performances. The Playhouse let the artists manage and retain any revenues from these nearly sold-out performances. While the artists kept the box office revenue, the Playhouse itself benefited from \$5,000 in additional donations from the community specifically as a result of those performances.

The Playhouse also secured emergency COVID-19 relief funding available in New Brunswick. They received a total of \$25,000 in special one-time funding from the Fredericton Community Foundation, the City of Fredericton, and the Province of New Brunswick.



## **The Takeaway: Reconceptualizing the theatre's role through an iterative approach**

A key part of the Fredericton Playhouse's pandemic response was to examine and redefine its role in the community. As a venue and presenter, the Playhouse would not typically hire artists for residencies. In the context of the pandemic, however, the team felt that it had a responsibility both to create work opportunities for local artists whose careers had been significantly affected and to help them navigate the ever-changing grant landscape. "Emerging artists aren't applying for grants," said Lesandra. "It was not just about them experiencing the Playhouse, working with our amazing tech team, and accessing the functionality and capabilities of our building. Supporting artists is also very important when it comes to those very basic career skills."

The InterMISSION program exemplified an iterative innovation model: the idea started modestly and grew as available resources, artist demand, and community support increased. "We weren't sure how big we were going to be able to make it," said Julie. As the project went along and more money came in, "we were able to fund more and more residencies". The residencies served as a pilot project that helped the Playhouse envision how residencies could fit into a regular season and align with its mission as a presenter. In the future, said Julie, "it is clear we can't have 10 or 13 residencies every year, but we can certainly do a few."

## IPAA Tech Bundles: Enhancing cultural sovereignty through technical infrastructure

Story Seeker: JP Longboat

People interviewed: Cynthia Lickers-Sage, Executive Director and Conor McSweeney, Project Coordinator

Interview date: August 10, 2021

The Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance (IPAA) is a member-driven National Arts Service Organization of professional Indigenous performing artists and arts organizations. IPAA serves as a collective voice for its members and for Indigenous performing arts in Canada. IPAA provides leadership, support, representation, advocacy, and practical assistance for the national development of Indigenous performing arts. IPAA is situated in the Tkarón:to (Toronto) area.

IPAA's Tech Bundle project was initiated in January 2021 to provide a kit designed for online streaming, presentation, and related services to Indigenous Peoples throughout Canada. Each Tech Bundle is made up of video equipment, sound equipment, lighting, cables, a MacBook Pro computer, software, and other equipment needed for recording and disseminating sound and video, whether live or recorded. Complementary to this, IPAA is in the process of producing video content to provide knowledge on equipment use. IPAA will partner with Indigenous community centres and organizations across Canada that will steward the equipment in their local areas.

The Tech Bundles project is a visionary initiative arising out of pandemic determinants, specifically in response to the first and second waves of COVID-19. Cynthia Lickers-Sage, IPAA Executive Director, noted that "COVID-19 has helped us recognize there is a great need to help develop technical infrastructure in order to support and encourage cultural sovereignty and the nurturing of community voices from rural and territorial Indigenous communities". During that period, IPAA invested in creating a technical infrastructure to encourage cultural sovereignty, provide training and mentorship opportunities, and promote wider engagement in the arts sector for emerging and mid-career Indigenous artists. IPAA provided oversight to the design, coordination, purchasing, and collaborative distribution of the Tech Bundles.

### **The Innovation: Adapting traditions to meet modern needs**

From a cultural perspective, a Sacred Bundle or "Medicine Bundle" is a wrapped collection of sacred items used to assist and guide the people through life. It is held by a designated carrier who is taught the protocol for its use and care. Bundles include our knowledge, innate ways of knowing, being, and doing as Indigenous Peoples. We can carry dancing bundles, song bundles, medicine bundles, healing bundles, and the list goes on. Those who take care of these Sacred Bundles usually have been chosen to carry on the teachings, the purpose, and the responsibilities which come with these bundles. IPAA decided this would be a perfect metaphor for their package of technical equipment and guiding knowledge.

The needs of northern Indigenous communities were revealed in detail from the work of the Northern Indigenous Presenter Network. Key activities for this Network are to foster the

development of best practices in negotiation and contracting, venues and public safety, marketing and outreach, as well as event logistics and presentation delivery. This work culminated in an online gathering and showcase that brought together Indigenous presenters from across Northern Ontario and Eastern Canada to share dance, music, and theatre that they might program in their communities. The gathering was also an opportunity for participants, funders, and invited guests to discuss current events, trends, and pressure points in the sector.

The presented works and accompanying discussions revealed many of the challenges that Indigenous artists and presenters are facing in representing their work successfully through video, digital media, and online platforms. IPAA quickly determined that these communities not only need physical resources, but also knowledge and guidance through workshops and hands-on experience. Prior to the pandemic, the success of this budding touring network had been based on IPAA's capacity to physically travel to each community (often with rented audio/visual equipment) to facilitate the presentation of Indigenous performing arts and to document and share these performances. This pre-pandemic model is no longer an option, so IPAA solidified the vision for its Tech Bundles, applied for strategic funding, and developed a plan to pivot services. Culturally, the project reinforces trade routes across territories which have been in use for thousands of years. Perhaps more importantly, it supports the remaking of inter-territorial kinship relations, stemming some of the isolationist effects of a variety of colonial policies since the creation of the Indian Act in 1876.

## **The Challenges: Supply chains and local infrastructure**

While IPAA had challenges with supply chain shortages, the Alliance did eventually manage to secure all 20 Tech Bundles and has started to distribute them. Because the goal is to have the bundles serve Indigenous communities throughout Canada, IPAA continues the search for Indigenous centres or organizations that can house, manage, and facilitate the sharing of these resources within their communities and regions. Challenges in securing these organizations outside of urban centres speak to the historic lack of arts infrastructure, limited access and working knowledge of these technologies, and lack of knowledge or familiarity with the medium. There has been little strategic investment in these types of services for artists and communities. However, these challenges do provide opportunities to foster capacity and infrastructure growth through project partnerships. Due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, the timeline for completing the instructional videos as well as scheduling the online workshop series has been extended. These efforts remain in progress and will be completed and distributed in the coming months.

## **The Financials: Supportive partnerships are key**

Project funding was received in spring 2021, which allowed the initial gathering of the technical and software elements for each of the Bundles. By mid-August, the assembly of the 20 Tech Bundles was complete. IPAA stresses how key partnerships have been in making this project happen, particularly on the part of Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Department of Canadian Heritage. IPAA was able to develop supportive business partnerships with Apple Canada and Long & McQuade to meet hardware and equipment needs. IPAA has also signed a partnership agreement with proScenium Services, an arts firm that is developing a course on livestreaming for arts presentations which will be pre-loaded onto the Tech Bundle computers for instructional



guidance. To maintain the program and the equipment over the long term, there will be very minimal rental costs for the use of the Tech Bundle. Access is central to this project and IPAA is committed to ensuring that no one is refused use of a Tech Bundle based on financial reasons.

## **The Takeaways: Serving national needs through infrastructure and know-how**

The takeaways for this initiative are many. First, the project has put a number of people to work over a significant amount of time over the past year. Second, it has helped IPAA add additional services as it endeavours to serve the diversity of Indigenous artists and communities across Canada. Third, the technical resources and the working knowledge of them will provide significant opportunities in many rural, territorial, and more remote Indigenous communities. Fourth, the inter-regional and inter-generational access to these Tech Bundles, the learning, and the mentorship opportunities for young people will be significant over the long term. IPAA is now developing a variety of learning and resource materials to support Tech Bundle use, including a workshop and training video series on how to use and care for the equipment as well as an instructional course on livestreaming for arts and cultural presentations.

## Kiran Ambwani's *Can-Asian Artistic Resilience* project: Photography in solidarity with the Asian community

Story Seeker: Myriam Benzakour-Durand

Person interviewed: Kiran Ambwani

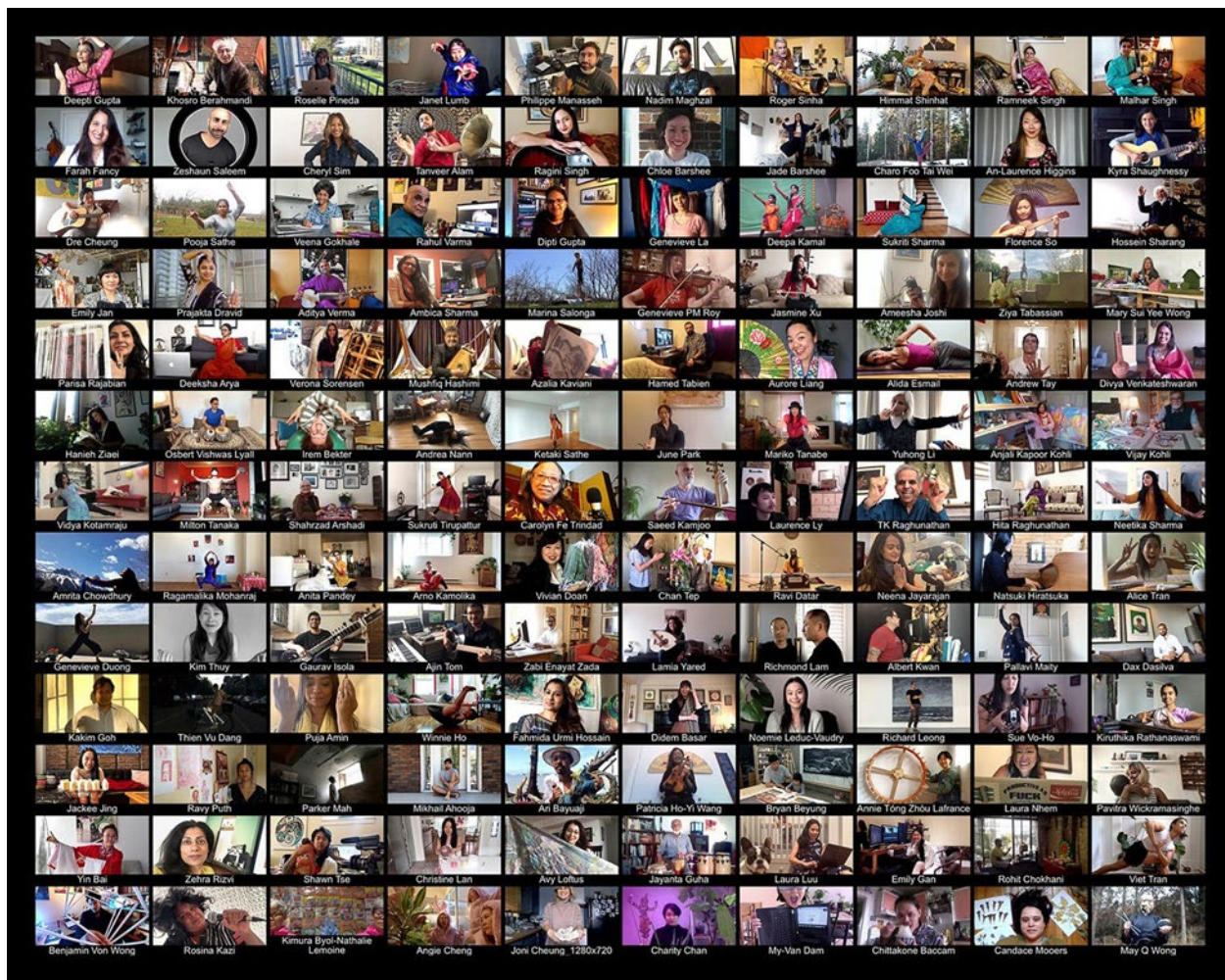
Interview date: June 15, 2021

Kiran Ambwani is a portrait and documentary photographer based in Montreal. She is a member of the board of directors of Festival Accès Asie, the first festival in the series of Montreal summer festivals to be confronted with pandemic restrictions and have to go online in May 2020. The festival's digital transition and the pool of Asian-Canadian artists who participated in it inspired her to develop a project called *Can-Asian Artistic Resilience*. From the beginning of the lockdown, Kiran wanted to use this project to give visibility to artists from this community who were facing higher levels of racism due to the pandemic. People who looked like they might be Chinese (Indonesians, Filipinos, Vietnamese, etc.) said they had been victims of an increase in racist behaviours.

*For some artists, this was a daily reality. There was a woman who told me she avoided going to the grocery store for a month because every time she went, she felt like people were looking at her strangely.*

Kiran gathered 135 personal stories for her project in order to describe the challenges and the realities of Asian artists during the pandemic and to show the contributions of this community. "They aren't viruses. They're human beings, artists, creators. They bring life and joy. And we should celebrate that."

Grateful for the federal Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) program, she used the income from it and her time in isolation at home to familiarize herself with Zoom, which she hadn't encountered prior to the pandemic. What started out as discussions and conversations evolved into screenshot photo sessions of the artists, whom she interviewed in their own environments (their homes, studios, countries, etc.). The photos complemented the artists' words, the image representing each person's universe, thereby giving additional insight into their situation during the pandemic.



## The Innovations: Screenshot photography and a new artistic approach

As a documentary photographer, Kiran has always placed great importance on contact and human connection in her work, and resilience is a subject she often explores in her projects. The innovative aspect of *Can-Asian Artistic Resilience* was the use of videoconference platforms such as Zoom, Messenger, WhatsApp, and FaceTime, which allowed her to continue photographing people despite the isolation and distance. Since she didn't have to leave home, she was quickly able to go from the 60 artists involved in the Festival Accès Asie to 135 artists living from coast to coast across Canada and even in other countries.

An important artistic adaptation was the new, participatory approach that resulted from meeting outside the studio, in the subject's own environment and private space. "In this project, my subjects were involved from start to finish, beginning with the creation of the image, because we started with their space, then we looked for the best light source, the most interesting angle to position their telephone, their computer."

In her studio, Kiran was usually the one who directed her models. But when she began working remotely, discussion and dialogue became distinct characteristics in the organization of her work. The models were involved in deciding how they wanted to be seen and how to present their realities, which gave Kiran some very interesting artistic challenges, as seen in the following two examples:

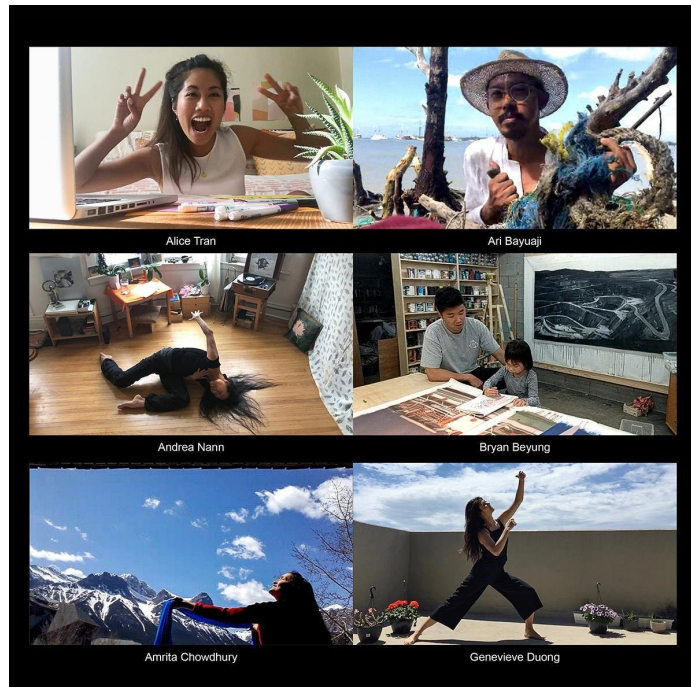
*An artist said to me, “So, I’m a transgender artist. Sometimes I’m a man, sometimes I’m a woman. Can you capture that in a Zoom image?” Okay... how do you do that?! I ended up editing on Photoshop, and I tried to present different facets.*

*The last one I did was in the artist’s living room, where there was a ballet barre and her two cats. Earlier she had told me that she had been dancing in her living room with her two cats. So we had her start by dancing in her living room, and I took screenshots. The final shot was obviously with her cat because that was her reality.*

One aspect that Kiran really appreciated was the participatory approach, which allowed her to evolve as an artist. She foresees using this approach in her future projects.

## The Challenge: Network capacity

Screenshots had the advantage of expanding the geographic scope of her connections. This didn’t come without its challenges, however. The number one challenge? “The network!” The quality of the subject’s Internet connection and computer equipment had a direct impact on the resolution of the screenshot image. Powerless to fix the situation, the photographer had to adapt her artistic approach. She let go of controlling the aesthetics of her image and accepted the reality of the artist at the other end of the video conversation. At first, she was uncomfortable with the lower-quality images, but over time she developed an appreciation of the (over)pixelation and the “very grainy” texture that this new medium allowed her to capture.





## The Financials: Emergency government assistance, but the project's future remains up in the air

Kiran no longer receives the CERB, and her photo contracts have started up again. She is seeking grants to sustain the *Can-Asian Artistic Resilience* project, which would allow her to dedicate more time to it. She applied for three grants, two of which are still being considered, one of which has been rejected. She would like to develop a bilingual website to give artists from across Canada a platform where they can share their art with each other and the public free of charge.

While awaiting funding, she has put her project on hold. The next step would be to hire a programmer and a translator, which would cost several thousand dollars that she doesn't have. She hopes to receive grant money or else she will have to find volunteers to do the work for free. Her deadline to secure financing and resources is May 2022. Kiran is motivated and believes in her project. "If I don't find anyone, maybe I'll just do it myself, and it will be a little less polished."

## The Takeaways: Artistic adaptation and community development

Two main aspects of *Can-Asian Artistic Resilience* stand out for Kiran: artistic adaptability and community development.

During the pandemic, Kiran demonstrated flexibility and the ability to adapt on several occasions. She developed a new work method—a collaborative approach—that she was able to add to her toolbox. She also adapted to a new kind of visual aesthetics in her photography.

The project began with 60 artists involved in the Festival Accès Asie and ended with 135 artists from various regions across Canada. Despite the social vacuum created by the complete shutdown of artistic events—openings, exhibitions, shows, and so forth—this project allowed her to stay connected to the community. She hopes that these beautiful encounters will eventually lead to other projects and collaborations.

Kiran gathered all of these personal stories not only to show and promote the reality of Asian artists, but also to show that, despite everything, artists will continue to create. She hopes that this project will motivate other artists and communities to stay connected, help each other, and be in solidarity with one another. Kiran also hopes that her *Can-Asian Artistic Resilience* project will show other communities the positive contributions that the Asian community has made and thus combat the racism that affects it.

## Musée d'art de Rouyn-Noranda: Virtual museum

Story Seeker: Myriam Benzakour-Durand

Person interviewed: Barbara Beranek, Communications Manager

Interview date: July 8, 2021

The Musée d'art de Rouyn-Noranda (MA) helps promote the arts of the Americas with its multidisciplinary programming. Located in the large territory of northwestern Quebec, the art museum affirms the importance of forging close and respectful ties with Indigenous Peoples and giving visibility to the cultural diversity of the recent immigration to Abitibi-Témiscamingue.

The *Virtual MA* project consists of a gallery of virtual exhibitions whose objective is to make the museum's exhibitions available outside the region as well as to offer schools pedagogical support and flexible access.

The team had the idea for *Virtual MA* before the pandemic. They started working on the first project in partnership with Cuba prior to December 2019 and put it online in 2020. The pandemic only served to accelerate things with the closing of the museum—resources were entirely dedicated to reaching and maintaining contact with the public, as well as providing continuous artistic offerings on a virtual platform.

### The Challenge: Maintaining artistic offerings and contact with the public

With the closing of the museum during the lockdowns in the first and second waves of COVID-19, the MA team needed to find a way to maintain artistic offerings and contact with the public, despite the health measures in place. MA Communications Manager Barbara Beranek said that prior to the pandemic, she had never used livestreaming tools on social media.

They started off slowly, with the education and outreach department offering online drawing classes for children. Then they created do-it-yourself video workshops. They also developed a virtual project to reach older adults at home in partnership with the Alzheimer's Society in Rouyn. Although things seemed a bit rough around the edges because of the learning curve associated with putting various projects on the Internet, these online platforms reached their different partners in a very positive way, and the content was greatly appreciated.

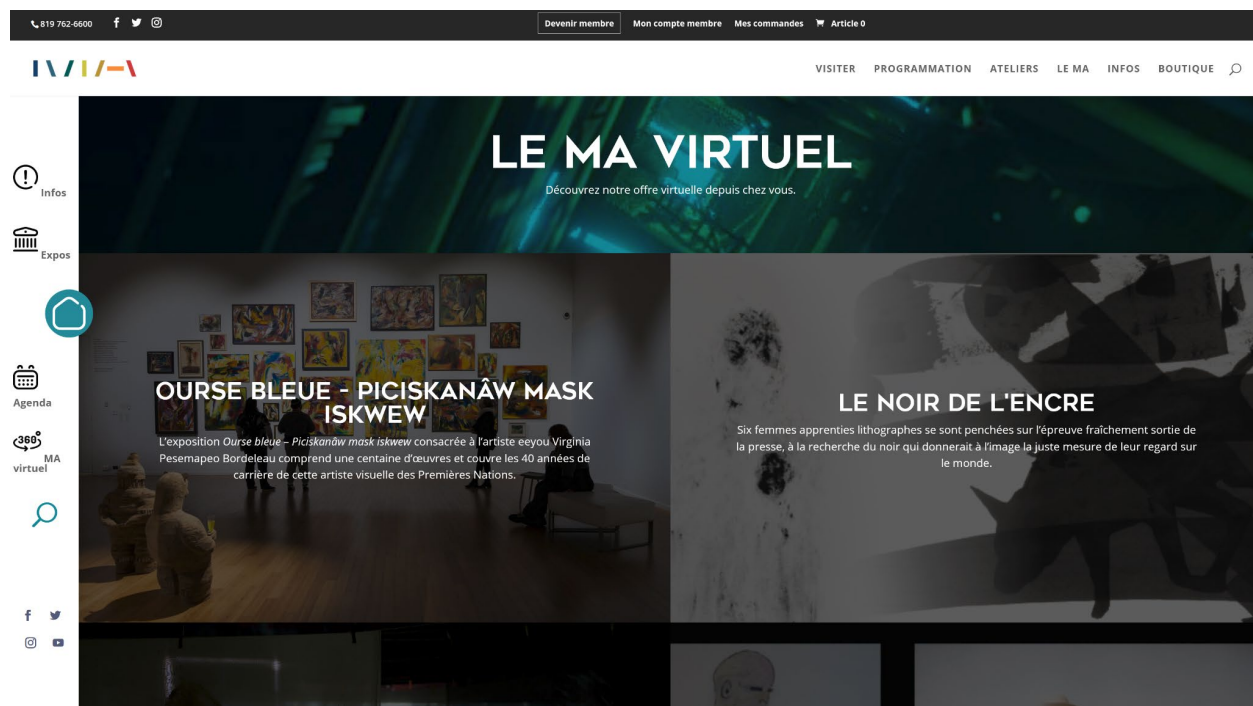
*It was good that we did it, because even if things seemed a bit approximate at first, it didn't really matter. People looked more at the content than at the elements that were maybe a little more disorganized. But in any case, it gave us new tools to use on social media. And I realized that, in my opinion, it works. People like it.*

## The Innovation: Creating an on-screen museum experience

In order to replicate the experience of visiting a museum, the exhibitions featured 360° image captures of the works of art and their accompanying labels. To support all these new elements, the MA team had to do a total makeover of their website. *Virtual MA* resides on its own dedicated page, which is separate from the museum website. The communications and outreach managers needed accelerated training to learn how to maintain the website.

The contract for the 360° image captures was awarded to a company in Rouyn that specializes in this field, primarily doing work for businesses and real estate agencies. This partnership simplified the museum team's job since they didn't need to be trained to shoot 360° image captures, nor did they have to acquire new photographic and other types of equipment. In addition, when they experienced technical problems or had other needs, it was just a matter of contacting the service provider, who in turn would send any requests to the developer.

When the museum closed during the pandemic, the team had to get the virtual museum project up and running very quickly. The upside of the lockdown was that all their resources—human and material—were put to use on *Virtual MA* instead of dividing their time between working on the project and maintaining their regular activities. Now that everything is set up, all that remains is to expand the virtual exhibitions and add to the education tools. The team is pleased to have focused on this project and to have accomplished it so quickly.





## The Financials: Digital outreach grant

The *Virtual MA* project was financed entirely by a digital outreach grant from the Quebec Ministry of Culture and Communications.

Since all expenses were covered, access to the exhibitions is free and will most likely remain that way.

## The Takeaways: Partnerships, taking risks, and prioritizing an important project to reach new audiences

Initially, the MA team wanted to do the *Virtual MA* project independently — they planned to get trained in shooting 360° image captures, programming, and more, as well as to purchase the necessary equipment. But the partnership with the Rouyn company that shot the 360° image captures greatly simplified the job, lowered production costs, and allowed them to make connections with the community. This partnership was extremely beneficial on many levels.

This project meshes well with the museum's mission. As a window on the arts of the Americas, the virtual component allows the museum to reach beyond Rouyn and connect with various communities elsewhere in Quebec, across Canada, and throughout the world. Of its 3,807 visits, 20% were from Canada (outside Quebec), 19% from Cuba, 13% from the United States, 5% from France, 3.5% from Spain, and 2.3% from Mexico. This wide visibility will allow the museum to develop new partnerships and should also bring about new opportunities.

The MA team is very proud of this project. They wouldn't have been able to accomplish it so quickly if it hadn't been for the pandemic. As Barbara said, "It was a good move and it happened at the right time. COVID forced us to push ourselves to the limit and make decisions quickly." The team took risks and put in the necessary effort and resources, and it paid off.

# Newfoundland Symphony Orchestra: Pay-It-Forward Subscriptions and Seniors Outreach Program

Story Seeker: Blanche Israël

Person interviewed: Hugh Donnan

Interview date: June 30, 2021

Through its Pay-It-Forward Subscriptions and Seniors Outreach programs, the Newfoundland Symphony Orchestra (NSO) generated new revenue streams, sustained its concert offering at regular season levels, and reached audiences virtually in remote parts of Newfoundland and Labrador where the orchestra had never toured before.

## The Innovation: A new subscription model and extensive outreach

The NSO's pandemic successes start and end with relationships. As the St. John's based orchestra quickly pivoted their activities online, it started offering digital subscriptions at a fraction of the cost of a regular live subscription. CEO Hugh Donnan noticed that NSO subscribers and donors were open to contributing more than the cost of one at-home subscription, because they had been accustomed to purchasing two live subscriptions. From this shift in purchasing patterns emerged an opportunity: Pay-It-Forward Subscriptions, a program that offered loyal NSO audiences the opportunity to purchase additional subscriptions that would give strangers access to the symphony's digital programming.

The NSO recognized the need in the community: "One of the groups most impacted right from the get-go by the pandemic were the residents in seniors' homes," says Donnan. "They weren't able to see other people in the home, had no community programming, couldn't do a lot of the things they normally do, like outside entertainment or trips out. They were really being isolated."

With a modest new revenue stream and a mandate to pay it forward, the NSO set out to connect with new audiences, including offering their season's programming free of charge to seniors' residences. The uptake was enthusiastic: 46 seniors' facilities in rural areas like Lewisporte, Newfoundland and Nain, Labrador were given access to the NSO's 16-concert digital season. Most of these rural areas "we had never been to, and may never ever go to physically", says Donnan. "We now had the ability to give them access to a concert." Some facilities chose to connect residents with the concerts via the distribution of iPads in the living facilities, while others held screenings of the concerts for groups of residents.



Sustaining their programming digitally offered the NSO opportunities to get creative in a variety of other ways. In St. John's, the NSO partnered with local restaurants to create signature cocktail mixes that could be ordered ahead of time for the show. Internally, the organization redeployed its volunteers, usually tasked with interacting with audiences at concerts, to help manage social distancing, sanitizing, and mask distribution among musicians at rehearsals. When the NSO had trouble sourcing plexiglass, it contacted a sign company and asked for a prototype of a see-through pop-up banner, which the sign company then branded as the "Band Mate".

"What we did was not rocket science," says Donnan. "We used YouTube; we used our website. Really I feel like the biggest innovation was the process - the way we delivered it. We worked hard to make it feel like you were 'doing symphony'": making the digital concert experience mimic the feel of a live concert through elements like pre-show chats, audience interaction, and a signature cocktail.

## **The Challenges: Geographical and legal questions**

The St. John's-based symphony had long been confronted with a challenge related to its provincial mandate: tours every few years did not allow it to reach many parts of the vast province. For example, there had never been a significant NSO tour to Labrador in the symphony's nearly 50-year history. But the NSO had also never done digital concerts before. "Without our production manager, it would have been impossible," says Donnan. It was the skill set and go-getter attitude of a single team member, not long-term planning and strategy, that got them through. The global shortage of equipment meant that cameras of different brands had to be sourced in a piecemeal fashion to ensure the NSO was ready in time for the first concert.

The NSO unionized three years ago and has worked with a collective bargaining agreement since that time. The orchestra's ability to pivot online was made possible by timely policy changes from the Canadian Federation of Musicians, including provisions that enabled orchestras with collective bargaining agreements to stream concerts.

Another key consideration was the need to make it financially worthwhile for the musicians to perform with NSO rather than just collecting the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). This meant that NSO had to find a way to keep musicians employed at a threshold of 85% of a typical season.

## **The Financials: New revenue streams, subscribers, and performance opportunities**

While the NSO's Seniors Outreach program was not designed to bring in revenues, it did have several positive financial impacts. "As much as our regular subscribers joined us online, we also have a ton of new subscribers." The symphony's outreach activities allowed them to connect with some better-resourced private seniors' residences in St. John's that might choose to supplement digital offerings with tailor-made, paid live performances throughout the year. Such avenues would allow the NSO to offer its players more paid performance opportunities throughout the year.



Although the NSO, like many organizations, saw a decrease in its overall revenues during the pandemic, Donnan was pleased with the results, which included about 230 subscribers and \$50,000 in subscription revenues during the 2020/21 season. "It was amazing that we were able to maintain that level while going from \$800-\$900 [in subscription revenue for a] couple to just \$150 for a whole household." Even single ticket sales, which the NSO treated as incidental because of the low price point between \$10 and \$20, brought in between \$20,000 and \$30,000 during the season.

## The Takeaway: Prioritizing people pays off

The NSO capitalized on an unexpected opportunity for visibility, with two key drivers: provincial health restrictions in Newfoundland and Labrador were generally more relaxed than those in other provinces due to lower COVID-19 case numbers; and top Newfoundland classical music talent, artists who were grounded at home during the pandemic, were available to perform with the NSO. “When we did Messiah, Classic FM listed us as one of the top Messiahs to listen to in Canada,” says Donnan. While the choir was smaller than it would have been in a typical year, it “was like the all-star team - people who were just luckily here because of COVID.” The live, distanced Messiah performances sold out: as Donnan points out, “we had more people go to our Messiah this year virtually than we ever would have had in a regular year”.

Reflecting on a challenging year, Donnan expressed great pride at what the NSO was able to accomplish, especially for their most important demographic: their musicians. “Everybody had choices,” he says. “We could have put our heads in the sand and just caretake. But we didn’t just want to disappear for a year. Right from the beginning, the goal was, because we weren’t as hard-hit as other places, to get as many musicians on stage as possible so we could pay them.” The NSO’s focused attitude allowed the organization to maintain its level of activity, unlike many other arts organizations: “our normal season is 16 concerts, and this season was 16 concerts.”

Beyond their musicians, Donnan notes that the NSO worked to be “there for our people: for our patrons, for our subscribers, and for the people of our province.”

As Donnan sees it, the Seniors Outreach project “has given us an ability, which we have never had before, to reach people all over the province. This is a permanent arm of our operations, for sure.” The project forged warm and wide-reaching connections that the NSO can now leverage to offer hybrid in-person/virtual programming post-pandemic. As the province reopens, the NSO is seeing more live performance opportunities in seniors residences as well as movie theatres, schools, and mental health facilities across the province.

The NSO now has the opportunity to connect with the whole province in brand new ways. Reflecting this, the NSO will soon include Labrador in its new name as the NLSO. In a globalized world, where identity and place are increasingly separate, the NSO can now envision its presence for the “large diaspora of Newfoundlanders across Canada and around the world.”



## Okanagan Children's Choir: Digital composition project

Story Seeker: Anju Singh

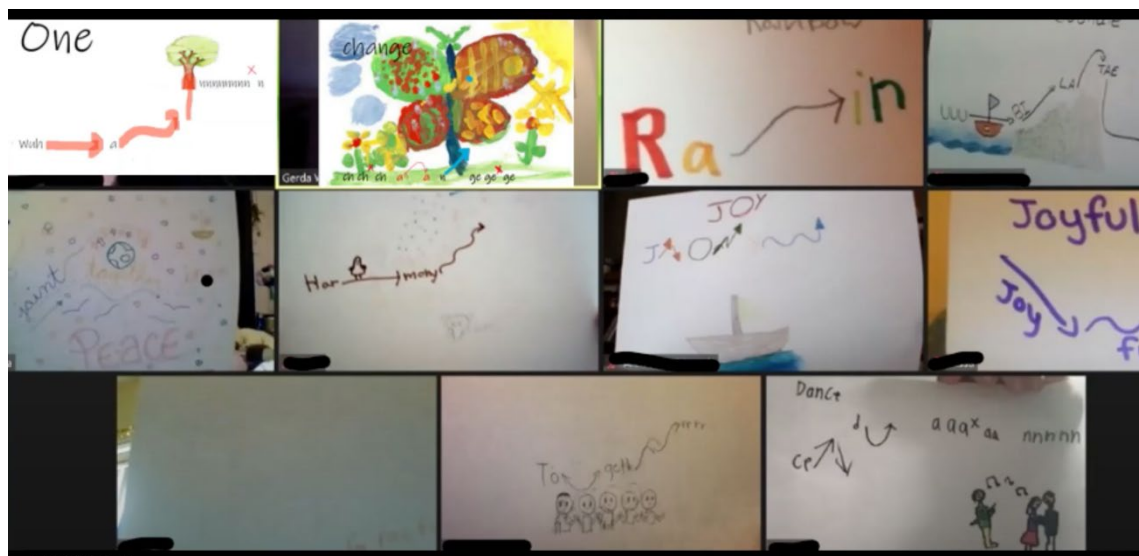
People interviewed: Gerda Blok-Wilson, Composer and Frances Chiasson, Artistic Director

Interview dates: August 27 and October 4, 2021

Okanagan Children's Choir Artistic Director Frances Chiasson continued with her organization's programming through the COVID-19 pandemic despite the challenges posed by government-mandated restrictions. Due to concerns around increased risk of viral transmission from singing, the choral arts were strongly affected by British Columbia's health regulations, which closed down all in-person singing events. Frances knew that many children and families depended on the programming that the small Kelowna-based organization provided so that the children could keep up with their singing and music training. In this context, she decided to explore new ways to engage the children that didn't require meeting in person.

She reached out to [Gerda Blok-Wilson](#), a Vancouver-based composer who had previous experience with children's choirs, to see if she had ideas for a creative project. Frances said that she wasn't sure what the project would look like when she first approached Gerda, but she did know that the priorities were for the project to be available to the children virtually (on Zoom) and to ensure that the children would be engaged.

Gerda and Frances decided to run a four-week project with one-hour sessions each week, during which the children would gain hands-on experience composing choral music, with the assistance of a composer. This strategy ensured that Frances's main goals were met: "the prime concern was to engage children in a new way, to practice singing, and to talk to a real life composer," she said.



## The Innovation: Using digital tools to teach composition

The project was Gerda's first time using Zoom and other digital tools to teach composition to children, and she was pleased with the results in terms of engagement and learning. "I thought it was a great way to access composition and technology; there was so much learning for the children with this kind of thing. And for a choir, we kept them singing and sharing each other's compositions, so the musical learning was unreal."

The project focused on a different compositional approach each week: graphic scores, rhythmic composition, and melodic/lyrical composition in weeks 1 to 3, followed by a combination of all three elements, which led to a production that was [recorded and shared on YouTube](#) for family, friends, and supporters.

Each week, the children created scores and sent them to Gerda before their next session. In advance of the session, Using an open-source audio production software called [Audacity](#), Gerda would interpret the scores and create something tangible for the children to experience. This approach of showing the children how their compositions could sound using digital tools allowed the children to understand the relationship between the scores and the choral arts, which also kept the children singing as a group despite being at home on their own. While Gerda shared that "it wasn't exactly like singing in a choir because you didn't have the sounds around you", she also saw the benefits of the exercise: "each week they heard what they sent to me. The feedback was really neat, and they sang along."

For Gerda, the interactive nature of the sessions was key to the project's success. In performing hands-on tasks and composing regularly over the four weeks, the children started thinking more actively about composition. "It gave the kids involved a different perspective of a composer; it gave them an inside view of what a composer does, or how a composer starts, or how to build and develop a song", Gerda said. To increase interactivity, Gerda had the children hold up their scores to share what they had composed. By sharing their work, the children could learn from one another.





The project allowed all the children to keep singing and learning, regardless of distance and location, showing that the format has the potential to increase the reach of arts learning programs. For Gerda, this is a strong argument to continue this project in a virtual format beyond the pandemic.

This project was the first time that the Okanagan Children's Choir engaged a composer to guide children in creating their own compositions. Frances shared that the Zoom format allowed the Choir to run this project in a cost-effective manner. Furthermore, Frances indicated that these cost considerations would make a future iteration of the project more viable in a virtual format.

## **The Challenge: Adapting to digital, both for the composer and the children**

Moving to digital meant preparing for the sessions in a different way. Gerda had much more prep work for the one-hour digital sessions than she would have for in-person sessions, including compiling all of the pieces into one digital file for easy display. She also used a music notation software called Sibelius to digitize the children's handwritten rhythmic, melodic, and lyrical compositions for an easy-to-follow visual with which the children could clap and sing along during the session. While this extra prep work was time-consuming, Gerda felt that it enhanced the in-session time that she had with the children and ensured that the hour together was interactive and valuable for the children. This involved quite a bit of work this first time, but she felt that it may be less work and time in the future as she becomes more familiar with the digital tools.

Another challenge was to support all of the children in the digital format. Some had difficulty submitting their works to DropBox (the tool Gerda used to collect the children's compositions) and required support with this part of the project. However, Frances said that Gerda was able to navigate this challenge by having the children hold up and share their work with the full group in cases where someone had not submitted their work in advance of the session.

## **The Financials: An internal investment**

The Okanagan Children's Choir invested its savings into this project to make it work. While the project was an additional cost for the organization, it was still able to run within the organization's budget due to the digital nature of the engagement of the remotely-based composer. Gerda had Frances' support with the technology, and the Choir provided Gerda with the Zoom account she needed to execute the project.

The project's main goal was to engage the children, not to increase audiences or generate revenues. The investment helped the organization meet this goal.

## **The Takeaways: Early learning of composition and an emphasis on interactivity**

Gerda believes that learning the art of music composition makes better musicians. For children, early access to this skill allows them to better understand the relationships between musical elements. Providing composition training through digital formats increases access to learning opportunities, and she believes that “everybody is capable of composition, so if it’s available online you can get started and grow”.

Gerda stressed that interactivity is a key element in a successful digital program: “If you go on Zoom for an hour and just sit there, it’s not inspiring. But when it’s active and you’re doing it, it makes such a difference.” She recommended thinking about “what are those activities that I can do to keep people active and engaged and doing part of the creating at the same time, even just holding up the composition to the Zoom camera - communicating what they had just done”.

For Frances, from an artistic director’s perspective, “engaging with composers is a marvellous thing for the kids to experience. Usually, we receive what is composed for us, so we create our own versions of the composition in performance. We had never engaged in the process of composition or talked to anyone about composition before.”

# The Orchestre symphonique de Montréal: It takes a village... to be resilient

Story Seeker: Myriam Benzakour-Durand

Person interviewed: Marianne Perron, Senior Director, Music Programming and Artistic Development

Interview date: July 9, 2021

On March 13, 2020, Quebec Premier François Legault announced the shutdown of schools and daycare centres for two weeks, early measures that marked the beginning of the lockdown. The Orchestre symphonique de Montréal (OSM) was set to launch its 2020-21 season around March 16, 2020. “A season takes one and a half to two years to plan, to develop. It was a Thursday, our brochures had been printed, and we had begun meeting with journalists that Monday,” explained Marianne Perron, Senior Director of Music Programming and Artistic Development. Although the programming was set and they had put their hearts and souls into the work, the team had to cancel more than 70 concerts because of the pandemic. “And just like that, everything fell apart. I remember being really depressed for 24 to 48 hours,” Marianne explained. After taking a 24-hour break, she gave herself permission to say, “It’s tough, it’s really tough. But all right, let’s get going.” Her team set up continuous programming, which was primarily online, knowing that the concerts could be cancelled at any time depending on the health measures. They developed expertise in a number of areas—in human resources as well as digital—to make sure the orchestra could continue to play. “An orchestra is like a football or hockey team. If they don’t play together on a regular basis, the team won’t be as good.”

## The Innovations: Reorganizing work processes and developing digital expertise

The government of Quebec’s health measures authorized musicians to remain on stage as long as the gathering respected physical distancing requirements and was for livestreaming or broadcasting purposes. These measures, combined with financial gymnastics and a great flexibility on the part of the teams and their working methods, allowed the OSM to maintain its activities.

In this situation, adaptability was a priority. The technical team had to quickly become specialized in digital production, and the orchestra had to adjust to different group dynamics. In addition, they had to guide audiences to build new habits — people weren’t accustomed to “attending” concerts on the Internet.

### Expertise: Webcasting classical music

Once the health measures were in place, the technical team went from a few webcasts per year to approximately 40 in very little time. The team had to rework the stage designs and choose repertoire based on the smaller number of musicians on stage—with a distance of two metres between players, they could only have one per music stand instead of two. In addition, before the pandemic, the OSM’s webcasts were free. The orchestra had to act quickly to find a way to receive income while offering concerts in this new way. They had to earmark some of the budget

for webcasting, as well as make cuts in other activities, for example, in the cost of guest artists. Budgets had to be revisited in collaboration with the members of the board of directors.

From a technical point of view, the orchestra did not have expertise in classical music webcasting. The technical team learned as they went and became specialists in the field. “We dealt with all kinds of problems with placement, harsh lighting, the lighting you use to create ambiance for an audience in a room, etc.,” Marianne recalls. The team invested a lot of time in developing this expertise and preparing highly polished offerings, as well as reflecting on technical aspects like shooting, editing, credits, and so forth. To lend a more human touch to the virtual programming, the team created explanatory video clips in which artists explained the pieces they had directed that would be played in the videos. None of this existed before the pandemic, but it has become a specialized classical music product that can be shared with other orchestras and artists, according to Marianne.

The virtual component was greatly beneficial in reaching new audiences. For example, the first school to register for the Youth Matinees was from Nunavik, in Northern Quebec. And the first concert in Montreal conducted by Rafael Payare, OSM conductor and music director, reached 80 countries with a total of approximately 125,000 views.

## Reorganization: Collaboration, support, and flexibility

Creativity and flexibility were the operative words for the 2020–21 program. Concerts, which generally required meetings and thought, were organized more spontaneously. The work structure became more collaborative: “We’re working less in silos. We’re learning to work remotely, to communicate.” This collaboration between the administration, producers, and musicians was great for team building. Team members made themselves available and were creative and ready to listen. They worked together and, in the end, they had a lot of fun. When talking about groups, however, habits don’t change overnight. Marianne noted that:

*Some people handle pressure more easily than others, which is something we saw right from the start. People don’t move at the same speed—their reaction might be to shut down completely, to fight, or to adapt. But at some point in a group, when more and more people start to adapt in the calmest way possible, others start to adapt too. And at a certain point, the group becomes flexible.*

Everyone’s comfort, health, and psychological well-being were at the heart of the decision-making process. Several initiatives were taken to support the teams, particularly for those members who lived alone and for whom isolation was more difficult—a network of phone calls, walks, morning phone calls, and so forth. Having received this support on a human level, employees invested themselves fully and were available and ready to make sacrifices.

## The Challenge: Rethinking working methods while maintaining jobs at all levels and relying on the community

The OSM's primary concern was to ensure that its staff was doing well. During the pandemic, the music community saw its entire structure and ecosystem collapse. The OSM had to rethink its working methods for a very complex orchestral environment.

At the OSM, there are three types of contracts: the administration, composed of employees with long-term contracts; the OSM musicians, who are officially contract employees with annual conditions; and the guest artists, such as orchestra conductors, soloists, pianists, and violinists, who are hired as contract workers and come from all over the world.

*When I say that we cancelled, it means that we cancelled on all our guest conductors and all our guest soloists, who also had their contracts cancelled by other music organizations throughout the world. With agents paid on commission, and who were working like mad for more than 14 hours a day, cancelling and rescheduling. But no concerts meant no performance fees. No performance fees, no money. So we had to rethink our working methods.*

Two elements allowed the OSM to maintain jobs and activities: a strong board of directors, whose priority was saving the in-house jobs, and support from the community through donations.

The board of directors' involvement and sheer hard work to get through the crisis encouraged the employees to be committed and to participate, regardless of the difficulties. Despite some instances of slight decreases in salaries, the entire OSM staff—administrators, producers, and musicians—kept their jobs. The members of the board of directors, several of whom are management specialists, met on a regular basis with the executive management and the human resources department to ensure that the employees were doing well. "Once we realized that this was an absolute priority, despite the tough times, I think this also contributed to the gratitude that the team and everyone else had for senior management." Marianne also expressed much gratitude for the love and financial support from the public who had been attending concerts for years. "We cancelled so many concerts, and people could choose to be reimbursed for the cost of the tickets, receive a credit to use when we resumed our activities, or make a donation. The percentage of people who made a donation was enormous." For Marianne, it is clear that this community support is necessary to be resilient.

## The Financials: Government funding and focus from the board of directors

At the financial level, not only did the community provide support, but the Quebec government showed considerable support for culture during the health crisis. This governmental presence, combined with the board of directors' investment and support, proved to be indispensable in creating a winning formula during this difficult time.

The Quebec Ministry of Culture and Communications helped the orchestra maintain its activities and gave it the financial assistance necessary to continue to hire Canadian guest artists. Marianne indicated that:

*We cancelled nearly half of the artists for the 2020–21 season, but we hired others who weren't initially scheduled. We hired many Canadian artists who were already in Canada, Canadian artists who agreed to quarantine and who used the opportunity to come here and play with us and to play elsewhere in Canada.*

This allowed for a beautiful collaboration between cultural and artistic organizations across Canada. "I could call my colleagues in the West and say, 'Is your music director planning to come to Canada, and when? If so, do you think I could hire him or her to come direct the OSM afterwards?'" Marianne recalled.

In addition, the Quebec Ministry of Culture and Communications offered financial compensation for ticket losses when organizations either couldn't hold in-person audiences or were able to have in-person audiences but with drastically reduced numbers in order to comply with health measures.

The OSM board of directors set up a finance committee consisting of members with specializations or experience in the field who closely scrutinized the finances. They developed plans based on different scenarios and took the time to look at all the files. "But not in a patronizing way, they were right there with us," Marianne recalled. In addition, they also recognized the commitment and all the hard work that the staff had put in.

## The Takeaways: Agility and community strength

Business agility is currently a popular concept. This method prioritizes individuals and their interactions, cultivates collaboration, and focuses on adapting to change. Marianne familiarized herself with the theory before the pandemic, and she wanted to hold a forum within the organization to consider ways they could make the OSM's organizational structure more agile. The health crisis helped ingrain the concept of agility in the organization's culture and activities. It is really beneficial to use this method when project teams, managers, and staff change their ways of being and thinking, which is exactly what happened with the OSM. As Marianne noted:

*Agility is not just one person on their own, it's an organization. And it doesn't mean that everyone does whatever they want, whenever they want. With agility, yes, there is a structure, an organizational structure that exists, but the organizational structure gives us enough flexibility to address problems in an agile manner.*



The involvement of the human resources department, the support from the board of directors, and the project staff's willingness to listen all contributed to resilience, according to Marianne. On a human level, a large orchestra is like a village. With about 100 musicians plus other team members, there are almost 200 people in the organization. Each person's level of comfort and psychological well-being had to be taken into consideration. Marianne is convinced that, in these difficult situations, "one person can't be resilient on their own. It has to be the group that becomes resilient, and when it does, there must be immense respect and excellent communication so people feel that it's worth it to be resilient."

Thanks to some financial and programming gymnastics, considerable governmental involvement, donations, and the organization's agility, the OSM continued to do what it does best—playing classical music—despite the crisis and health measures. They put energy, heart, and humanity into their work so they could continue to present concerts, communicate with audiences, offer programs and notes on the works, and provide highly polished products. Although many cultural organizations disappeared from the stage, the OSM made every effort to give concerts and fill the artistic void. Because, as Marianne said, quoting Daniel Bélanger, "Art, culture... it's not useful, but it's indispensable."

## Prince Edward Island's Department of Education: Teaching and modelling resilience through the arts

Story Seeker: Margaret Lam

People interviewed: Vicki Allen-Cook, English Arts Education and Creativity Curriculum Specialist; Cécile Arsenault, French Cultural Program Coordinator

Interview date: August 30, 2021

In Prince Edward Island, arts education for Kindergarten to Grade 12 students is championed by two staff members at the Ministry of Education and Early Learning: Vicki Allen-Cook, English Arts Education and Creativity Curriculum Specialist, and Cécile Arsenault, French Cultural Program Coordinator. While the two are positioned in different language school boards, they are close friends and collaborators who have worked tirelessly to integrate the arts into all aspects of the curriculum development on the Island.

This is a story about two champions in arts education, their journey during the first 18-months of the pandemic, and the importance of fostering creativity in students. The story focuses on two arts-based programs: the PEI Student Drama Festival and the ArtsSmarts PEI Learning Experience.



### The Innovation: Delivering arts education during a pandemic

Vicki and Cécile are both passionate about the value of arts-integrated learning in core subjects such as math, language arts, social studies, and the sciences. They have found that students perform just as well, if not better, when the arts are integrated into the learning environment. Arts-integrated learning is an arts-based pedagogy that incorporates art making and the creative process into the curriculum of any subject. It offers an alternative mode of engagement for students who might not be receptive to the more traditional classroom format. It also intentionally fosters creativity in K-12 students. A big part of Vicki and Cécile's work involves

debunking the often mistakenly held belief, by teachers and parents alike, that arts education is only for those who aspire to be artists.

During the pandemic, when delivery of arts-based curriculum became incredibly difficult, alternatives that supported remote learning became a valuable source of mental health support for students. Engaging in creativity and collaboration is one way for students to feel connected and excited when they are missing the social aspects of in-person-learning. The multi-sensory nature of the arts also facilitates a learning experience that involves the whole body, which can lead to improved student outcomes overall.

Over many years, Vicki and Cécile have fostered close relationships with local artists as well as the Faculty of Education at the University of Prince Edward Island, and these relationships have paid off in the quality of their arts curriculum. Building on this strong artistic and pedagogical foundation, they crafted their response as students switched to remote learning in early 2020.

The [PEI Student Drama Festival](#) has traditionally offered an opportunity for groups of drama students on the Island to produce a short play to be performed at various local theatre festivals. It offers a chance to put together a short production and learn from local theatre professionals. With the uncertainty around live performances during the 2020-2021 school year, Vicki and Cécile decided to revamp the festival and deliver it to students as a digital experience.



In the digital edition of the festival, students were asked to write their own scripts, rather than adopting an existing script as had been done in previous years. In an attempt to compensate for the lack of opportunity to produce a full play in a venue, students were offered artist-led workshops on blocking and lighting design, as well as additional topics such as choreography, costume design, makeup and scriptwriting. The workshops were recorded so that they could be used again for future drama classes and expanded upon in future student festivals.

In addition to arts-specific programs, there are many other arts-based education offerings for K-12 students, such as the [ArtsSmarts PEI Learning Experience](#). This program, the largest

educational initiative of its kind in Canada, aims “to develop global creative / innovative thinkers and doers by integrating the creative process of the arts into school curricula.”.

The ArtsSmarts program brings together local artists and teachers to collaborate on the development of [arts projects](#) that reflect the expected learning outcomes in subjects such as math, science, and language. For example, one project introduced students to the work of [M.C. Escher](#), as they applied mathematical conversions in order to create fibre-glass sculptures that were displayed at the school. According to the math teacher, “I had one parent contact me to say that her daughter could not, under any circumstance, miss a math class because she loved the project we were working on.”

Throughout the curriculum development and delivery process, educators gain professional development in arts-integrated education, and students have a variety of opportunities to nurture their creativity. Artists also have an opportunity to get to know the students and get a glimpse of what matters to today’s youth.

Furthermore, the ArtsSmarts program views artistic and creative processes as fundamental to innovation. Learning how to generate ideas, gather and incorporate feedback, iteratively develop those ideas, and produce a final presentation are all critical and highly transferable skills in our increasingly digital society.

## **The Challenges: New technologies, new channels, new processes**

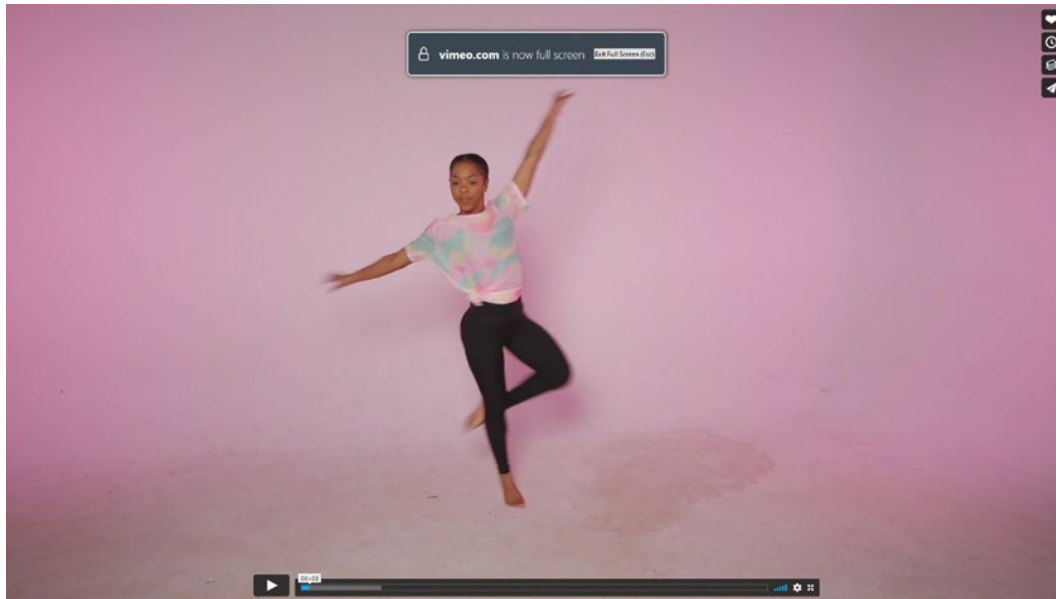
Coming up with the digital edition of the Student Drama Festival required Vicki and Cécile to put themselves in the students’ shoes, imagining how students might think and feel in their homes and what resources they might need to collaborate in the creation of a play. This approach was applied throughout the planning and delivery of this new learning experience. The positive response from students, teachers, and artists validated their efforts and encouraged them to continue developing and offering this digital opportunity to future students.

Regarding ArtsSmarts, Vicki and Cécile explored numerous approaches to support the remote delivery of learning experiences in 2020, modelling the spirit of creativity that their curriculum is intended to teach. For example, they broadcasted lessons through the local cable television network after a slot opened up when local school sports were suspended. This involved a huge learning curve to adapt teaching materials to comply with copyright laws related to television, in addition to directing a number of video productions -- something that they had not done before. These efforts led to the creation of a YouTube channel specifically for PEI schools. All of these innovations had the benefit of ensuring that students had access to arts education even when learning remotely.

“Our Musical Island”, their most recent ArtsSmarts project, is a pilot project that incorporates the new experiences and ideas that have emerged over the last 18 months. The learning objectives were to support the Island’s large number of immigrant and newcomer students and to enrich the music curriculum across the school board. Vicki and Cécile co-developed the in-school

component and video learning resources with PEI musicians who represent a variety of musical cultures and practices.

The successful pilot engaged 13 musicians and 11 music teachers, was delivered in 10 schools, and reached 1,000 students. The quality of the musicians and the learning resources can be seen in a [promotional video](#) about the program. If the team's efforts continue, the Island has the potential to be a leader in arts-based education in Canada and beyond.



## The Financials: A responsive and nimble approach

Vicki and Cécile, who respectively work for the English and French school boards, often pool their resources to deliver their arts education programs. The online Student Drama Festival and ArtsSmarts each had a budget between \$30,000 and \$35,000, which paid for artists, Elders, art materials, equipment, videographers, and the rental of studio and exhibition spaces. The programs also benefit from many in-kind contributions and volunteer efforts.

Since many of these initiatives were in their first year or pilot phase, some of the initial expenditures may carry forward and reduce some costs in the future. New ways to maximize financial resources across the different boards and programs, as well as other revenue generating opportunities, are expected to emerge over time as Vicki and Cécile continue to expand these new teaching and learning formats through the Ministry.

## The Impacts: Expanding awareness of arts-integrated learning

Responding to the new reality of remote arts education involved a dramatic shift in the way Vicki and Cécile worked, but they embraced the challenges with an artistic spirit. Their creative problem solving resulted in remarkable success and was incredibly meaningful in such exceptional times.

The impacts on students and parents of having access to K-12 arts education while learning remotely is hard to quantify. However, it is noteworthy that the new learning resources were available to parents, who would not have been able to view the lessons if they were delivered in-school. This presented a tremendous opportunity to engage parents and the broader community in a conversation about the value of arts education.

## The Takeaways

A strong foundation in a few key areas gave the PEI Ministry of Education and Early Learning an edge in their new, remote arts education programs:

1. *Prioritizing the development of creativity as a core learning outcome.*  
Arts education isn't just for those looking to become artists. It is a vehicle through which all students can develop critical and creative thinking skills that are highly transferable to any professional field. Vicki and Cécile further advocate for making it a graduation requirement for high school students.
2. *Taking a student-centred and community-focused approach in curriculum design.*  
When developing an arts curriculum, one should start with an understanding of the students' lived experiences and the community's needs. This is reflected in the PEI programs, from the artists engaged in curriculum design and delivery to the reality of newcomers that have arrived to the province, to the way Vicki and Cécile empathized with students' remote learning experiences at home.
3. *Foster strong relationships grounded in strategic alignment.*  
The strength of the relationship and collaboration between Vicki and Cécile was fundamental to their ability to effectively respond during a pandemic. Their collaborative approach allowed them to pool English and French program resources and richly informed the content of arts-integrated learning opportunities. Their teamwork also provided much-needed mutual support, both when changes didn't go as planned and when great successes were achieved.



# The Queer Songbook Orchestra's QSO Kids project: A renewed focus in an uncertain landscape

Story Seeker: Blanche Israël

Person interviewed: Shaun Brodie, Artistic Director

Interview held: August 11, 2021

The Queer Songbook Orchestra (QSO) was formed in Toronto in 2014 as a 14-piece professional chamber pop ensemble dedicated to celebrating and sharing LGBTQ2+ stories and music. Until the pandemic, the QSO toured extensively throughout Canada and abroad, and had been featured at many performing arts festivals across the country. In 2020, QSO Artistic Director Shaun Brodie had to grapple with the new landscape of touring, and he started to imagine a different path forward for the ensemble. In his words:

*When the lockdown and this great abyss appeared, it felt like it really wiped the slate clean, because all of what we were focusing on was no longer feasible for the foreseeable future. After a few months of feeling adrift and wondering if there was a future for the organization and how it was pre-COVID, and having the space and the quiet to reimagine things and rethink how we were doing things, a few ideas started to form. They all centred more on our community here: what we can do locally rather than thinking in that more international perspective that I had been fixated on prior.*



At the beginning of 2021, the QSO incorporated as a not-for-profit organization dedicated to utilizing story and song to express, honour, and elevate LGBTQ2+ experience, including by providing opportunities for mentorship and other supports to queer, trans, questioning, and allied youth. While experiencing growing pains of the new not-for-profit structure and navigating the constant shifts of the pandemic, the QSO created a school program that generated a new revenue stream and has the potential for expansion

across the country.

## The Innovation: Collaborating with schools and learning how to livestream

The QSO forged a unique path as an LGBTQ2+ performing arts organization entering the young audience realm. Specifically, the QSO developed QSO Kids, a digital livestream show for elementary school students, which required the organization to learn how to create a show for livestream while navigating school requests and requirements.

The ensemble had been approached prior to the pandemic to develop material for children between 6 and 12 by festivals like the Harbourfront Centre's Junior Fest in Toronto and ArtStarts in Vancouver. "We kind of had a concept and were starting to develop something in 2019, but we never had time to commit to doing it," said Shaun. Just before the pandemic, a parent who had seen a QSO show asked Shaun if the ensemble would consider performing at McMurrich Junior Public School, where her daughter was a student and where she sat on the Parent Pride Committee.

In fall 2020, once the dust of initial school shutdowns had settled, Shaun heard from the Parent Pride Committee once again and started meeting with them regularly on Zoom to firm up the offering. Even without knowing what would come out of the meetings, Shaun appreciated the regular check-ins: "It was kind of like a social hour for me, it was great." This level of involvement from the presenter was a first for the QSO. "Normally, I don't really work with the presenter or the promoter to develop something," said Shaun. "They have an idea of what we do, they invite us, and we do it." But in this case, the QSO worked much more directly with the committee and the school. "It felt like we were more of a team. I enjoyed it."

Shaun worked with the team of parents and consulted with educators through the development of the show to ensure that the content was appropriate for the students. According to Shaun:

*We put a lot of thought into how we would adapt our material for this younger demographic. We ended up focusing on younger narratives that normalize queerness and difference and otherness. Our intent in this is to bring more visibility to the LGBTQ2+ experience, so kids have that to relate to, and the kids who aren't queer have that broader understanding.*

Beyond the shift in its creative process, the QSO also had to figure out the technological aspect of capturing the show and disseminating it to the students. "Doing an hour-long livestream - we hadn't done that before," noted Shaun. The QSO used its experience with short livestreams and pre-recorded shows to help put together its approach. With limited resources, the organization relied on skills that members of the



organization had independently developed in their downtime during the pandemic. For example, the group's sound technician undertook training to increase her skills as a livestream technician.

After the pilot performance of QSO Kids in May 2021, the organization was able to use the project as a proof-of-concept to promote and organize a much broader rollout in both livestream

and pre-recorded formats for elementary-aged audiences across Canada. The QSO started working on this in August 2021 for the 2021-2022 school year and has secured two bookings to perform the show live and in person as a full ensemble, restrictions permitting, in 2022.

## **The Challenges: Potential pushback, no safety net**

The QSO is an arts organization focused on queer rights, which can present challenges related to working with schools. The QSO had to grapple with the possibility of pushback from parents and administrators who might have different notions of what is appropriate for the target age range. Shaun recalled that, “before we did that livestream, I sent some of these stories to [...] an elementary school teacher in Northern Manitoba. Her comment was, ‘the school you are doing this for must be a much more progressive school than the one where I teach.’” In the future, when developing the program for other schools across the country, the QSO may face continued challenges related to notions of appropriateness and progressiveness.

Until the pandemic, the QSO was an unincorporated collective with very little infrastructure that relied on one-off project grants and performance fees. In this context, Shaun and the other QSO members had to take other work while they tried to keep the momentum of the organization going through the pandemic’s uncertain times. The QSO was reimagined to help it weather the pandemic, including through its incorporation as a not-for-profit, which Shaun hopes will contribute to increased stability and resilience in the long run.

## **The Financials: A small pilot budget with the potential for significant new revenue streams**

As a grassroots collective, the QSO was accustomed to working with limited resources. For the pilot project, the McMurrich Public School Parent Pride Committee offered the QSO a modest guarantee from its events budget, which the QSO was able to stretch to meet the project’s needs. “We were able to get a venue for free with all the livestream capabilities, so that was not an expense,” said Shaun. He focused as much of the budget as possible on paying other people. “Essentially everyone got paid from the fee we got, except me,” said Shaun.

Though the pilot didn’t bring in a lot of revenues, it opened the door to a completely new revenue stream for the QSO: performance fees from schools. In addition, when the QSO was starting to expand the idea after the pilot, it heard about a one-time grant that fit the project perfectly: the Canada Council for the Arts’s Digital Now program. Thanks to the success of that grant application, Shaun said, “we now have a budget to produce a more well done, well edited, and packaged pre-recorded show that will be available for schools over the coming year.” The funding will serve to pay all the artists and to provide some revenue to the organization over the next year. A bonus: the budget does not depend on being able to perform in person.

## The Takeaways: Drawing on past challenges, finding flexibility and adaptability

To overcome the personal and professional challenges that he and the QSO faced through the pandemic, Shaun drew on his knowledge of the beauty that can emerge from adversity. “Fruitful ideas can come out of, essentially, hitting rock bottom. Originally the idea came out of my not really having any direction and not knowing where I was going to go with my career and with my life,” he said. “This idea started to form from the intersection of my ideas and my identity.”

His experience of resilience and perseverance through uncertainty served him well in 2020. He reflected that:

*When the pandemic hit, we had some momentum behind us, we were figuring out what we were doing, we had a decent live show. When the bottom fell out of that, it really felt again like I didn't know what I was going to do. Out of that time of wondering and being adrift, these new ideas formed.*

The success of the QSO Kids project shows that flexibility and adaptability are key. In Shaun's words, resilience is about “being able to find the opportunity when things don't go as you planned, but then being able to look at it from a different perspective and see what can be made of where you are at.”

## re:Naissance Opera's Orpheus VR project: Pushing the limits of opera

Story Seeker: Anju Singh

Person interviewed: Debi Wong, Artistic Director

Interview date: August 3, 2021



Debi Wong, Founder and Artistic Director of Vancouver-based re:Naissance Opera, fell into the opera world through her vocal studies at the University of British Columbia. Her interest in opera was piqued by the discipline's collaborative and multidisciplinary aspects, which incorporate a variety of experiences, backgrounds, and levels of expertise to execute successful and innovative productions. Debi founded re:Naissance Opera in 2017 to “produce modern-day operatic performances” that bring diverse people and communities together. It's no wonder, then, that Debi's company dove headfirst into an innovative tech collaboration to produce Orpheus VR, a virtual reality opera.

Orpheus VR “stemmed out of my own love for video games,” said Debi. “I grew up with every single game console you can think of, starting with the Super Nintendo. The classic Super Nintendo was my first one, and up to now we play [PlayStation 4] and my Nintendo Switch.” As a more traditional Western European art form, some of the approaches to producing opera are rooted in methods developed more than four centuries ago. Debi wanted to find new ways to engage audiences and encourage participation, play, and collaboration in opera making, thereby creating an interactive or “gamefied” experience for audiences. A conversation with a friend encouraged Debi to reach out to a virtual reality artist. After their initial discussions, she decided to “do it in VR and make it an immersive experience”, she said.



## The Innovation: Gamifying opera

Debi's passion for new ideas and finding ways to engage audiences fuelled her drive to pursue the creation of a VR opera. This innovation involved many layers for the company. As Debi noted, "If I were going to create a new piece of opera for a proscenium stage using the tried and true methods that have been used for a very long time, I would have a composer, a librettist, eventually I would bring in designers, conductors, stage directors." Creating a VR opera, on the other hand, required a completely different process and approach:

*Because we're creating an interactive 360° experience, we have to really be in tune with what we think [audiences] are going to do, or how we think they're going to engage with the piece, so that they don't get lost in an endless VR world, or they don't get confused and bored and just quit, or they can still understand the story. Because they have agency in the story.*

The creation of a VR opera requires a clear understanding of, and focus on, the intended audience. "The audience is a very crucial part -- they are co-creators in a way; -- that's the experience we want for them", said Debi. "So we are very much thinking about the audience all the time, and testing with audiences all the time."

This audience focus had an impact on the musical composition process, which differed from Debi's experience with traditional opera development. The sound composition, created by Brian Topp, was entirely electronic and modular -- designed in short sections, like in a video game -- to allow for different audience reactions, such as the varied time spans that audiences would decide to spend in a scene (from 30 seconds to 5 minutes). It was also necessary for script writers to work in a way that predicted audience behaviour, finding creative ways to help audiences through the experience and to pique their interest throughout the piece.





Costume design was another area where the process took a detour from the more traditional opera-making approach. With avatars, the costume designer was actually a 3D artist, Conrad Sly, who would mold the characters using digital tools and brushes. For Debi, it was exciting to witness the artist wearing a VR headset to “create the world around him, painting the ground below and sky above”. Alongside Conrad, Orpheus VR’s creative team included a programmer/developer, Youhan Guan, with experience building video games, as well as an animator/motion capture specialist, Neel Nair, who played a role similar to a stage director and choreographer (i.e. instructing the performers on what to do).

While the ideation phase for Orpheus VR began prior to the pandemic, the interest in a virtual reality opera picked up significantly when in-person productions were essentially shut down. This turned out to be an opportune time for re:Naissance Opera to take on the project: it could focus on the VR project and make the production happen. The company completed a [prototype of Orpheus VR](#) that is currently being shown and tested alongside a companion program, “Live from the Underworld”, which features livestream performances using mythological avatars.

Debi noted that Orpheus VR has reached a different demographic of opera audiences. While in-person [opera audiences tend to be over 55](#) years of age, Orpheus VR reached a primary audience between 25 and 44. re:Naissance Opera was pleased with this shift.

The company embraced the technology sector as a source of potential collaboration and new opera audiences. Debi shared her feeling that:

*The tech sector is so creative, and the ways they go about problem-solving, and creating, and innovating, the processes for that are just things we don’t learn about in the classical music world. Just simple things like ‘design thinking’. I had never heard those two words together before I started working with people from the tech sector. It’s just interesting to find new ways to think about your own creativity from that kind of collaboration.*

The choice of VR technology for this production was driven by its capability to deliver immersive audience experiences, with voice, environment, and movement all included in the expression of the piece. The company engaged a motion capture studio to fully grasp the vocal quality, voice, and body movement nuances and personalizations of the singers. In that way, these elements could be infused into the singers’ VR characters.

As motion capture technology quickly developed, re:Naissance Opera secured funding to buy a motion capture suit linked to an iPhone that would capture the performers’ voices, facial expressions, and movements, and then broadcast their avatars. Currently, re:Naissance Opera is using a video game engine called Unreal to create livestreams alongside the Orpheus VR project. This in-house technical production capacity provides re:Naissance Opera with substantial independence and flexibility to experiment and innovate without taking on considerable cost.

## The Challenges: Experimenting with an emerging technology

One of the project's main challenges is that VR is an emerging technology. There have been many steep learning curves where there was no precedent to rely on. The re:Naissance Opera team viewed learning as part of the excitement of the project, but this also added unanticipated time and costs to the project.

Choosing which headset to build for was a daunting task. After extensive research, the team settled on the [Oculus](#) headset due to its mobile feature, which eliminates the need for it to be plugged into a computer during use. This headset later became one of the more popular consumer VR headsets, which makes Orpheus VR accessible to a larger potential audience.

Accessibility is an ongoing challenge, particularly the affordability of headsets. The Oculus costs between \$300 and \$500. To address accessibility concerns, re:Naissance



Opera makes headsets available at their events for audience members who need them to experience the opera. While the headsets are a technical element of the piece, Debi felt it was important to maintain the spirit of experimentation in the creation of Orpheus VR. As such, she was not interested in being tied to one particular technology. Rather, she used the chosen technology to express her vision. For instance, “Live from the Underworld” -- the livestreamed avatar opera -- doesn’t require headsets to experience. Debi is exploring a move to multi-platform access points, including building the Orpheus VR world online, in a social media setting, and in other exciting ways that have yet to be dreamed up.

Another challenge has come from conventional views of the nature of opera. re:Naissance has sometimes come across criticism like “that’s not opera” or “that’s not classical music”. However, Debi believes that innovation and experimentation with the art form allow new ideas to flourish and provide new ways to grow opera, rather than taking away from or tearing down what has come before.

## The Financials: Getting funders and in-kind support on board

re:Naissance Opera credits the Canada Council for the Arts as the first funding body to take a chance on the virtual reality opera project through a small research and development grant. As is often the case, it became easier to secure more funding for the project once the initial funder was on board. Creative BC’s Interactive Fund quickly followed with significant funding.

the [Sawmill](#), a Vancouver-based motion capture studio, provided partial in-kind support in the form of expertise, consultation, and studio time. This support gave the project a level of technical skill and capacity that would have added significant cost.

Finally, the BC Arts Council provided a grant for the motion capture suit and other equipment needed to create content. The Support for Workers in Live Arts and Music Sectors Fund from Canadian Heritage allowed the company to include more artists in its productions.

In terms of earned revenue, the company offered a tiered ticketing system, allowing attendees to choose to pay more or less for tickets. re:Naissance always includes a pay-as-you-go option as well.

While the project received significant funding and support, Debi reflected that the team could have used much more, given the need for studio time, technical equipment, and a large team. The company was able to create the piece thanks in part to many in-kind hours from the creative team.

## **The Takeaway: Collaborating to build bridges and bind communities together**

Debi is interested in using the collaborative nature of opera-making to find new ways to create, bring new perspectives and ideas into the discipline, include artists from different disciplines, and engage new audiences. She views these innovations as an opportunity to diversify the artform's offerings. She also feels that this way of working "builds bridges between other industries, in the spirit of opera as a collaborative tool to bind new communities together and build new bridges between communities of artists and people."

re:Naissance Opera's innovative, boundary-pushing approach to opera makes it an exciting company to follow.



## rice & beans theatre: Yellow Objects

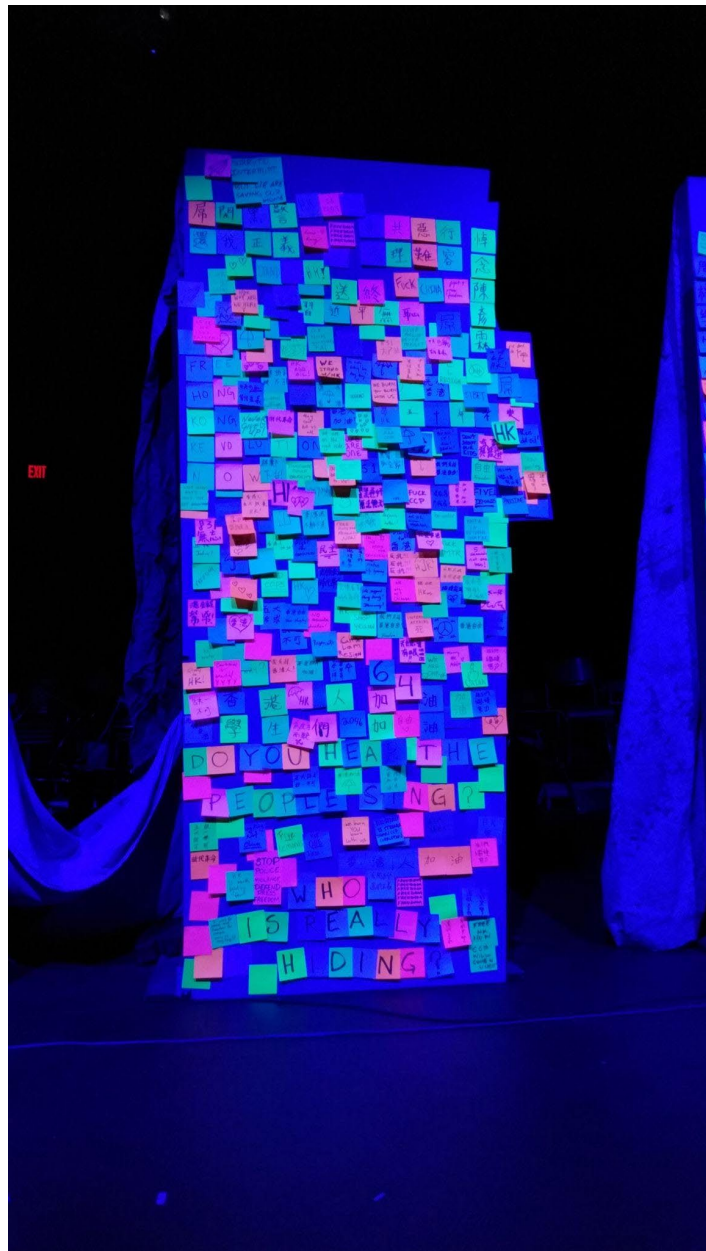
Story Seeker: Anju Singh

Person interviewed: Derek Chan, Co-Artistic Director of rice & beans theatre

Interview date: July 8, 2021

Vancouver-based rice & beans theatre, founded by theatre makers Pedro Chamale and Derek Chan, is a small company whose mandate is to produce theatre that tells intercultural and multilingual stories inspired by where the artists came from and where they are going. It is through this mandate that Co-Artistic Director Derek Chan felt a strong responsibility to share a story of his home, Hong Kong, which led him to develop a digital installation entitled “Yellow Objects” as a direct response to the pro-democracy and social justice movement in Hong Kong in 2019-2020. Derek wanted the work to allow the 15 artists, designers, and actors working anonymously involved to “keep saying the words and telling the stories that we’re not allowed to say back home anymore -- things that will literally get us arrested, and have a space for us to be together”.

Originally a stage play, the text was transposed into a digital installation to enable the story to be told without live actors and to be available to an expanded audience. While the primary target audience for the work is people in Canada with a close relationship to Hong Kong, the installation also aimed to develop awareness among audiences who may not know about what has been happening in Hong Kong, especially as international media coverage on the issue has been limited and focused on the COVID-19 pandemic over the past year and a half.





## The Innovation: Manifesting theatre through digital storytelling and “directing in a language of pixels”

Yellow Objects started out as an imaginary future of Hong Kong, but many of the events in the play started to become reality. The group workshopped the play and engaged in some early-stage virtual design workshops with projection designer Daneel Olivaw to see how the stage play could be actualized. During this process, the artists worked with digital tools that allowed them to sketch out the performance space, test lighting, place actor-figures in the space, and run projections. This process provided the artist with considerable flexibility to model and experiment with ideas, because the traditional workflow of “climbing up and down ladders” to make changes in the studio was not necessary. While working with these digital technologies, Derek thought that, if the pandemic was the new reality for the foreseeable future, he should perhaps start thinking about “a version of this project that can be done without live actors, while still keeping a semi-interactive storytelling experience”. Yellow Objects adapted to an installation format and achieved exactly that.

As a theatre maker, Derek had not yet created a digital installation of this scale, but he did have experience working with recordings of voices and live digital moving parts. He took the opportunity to explore and experiment with new elements, including creating a story that an audience could experience live in a space, but without live actors. Derek considered this an exciting manifestation of theatre. In the context of the pandemic, this format not only allowed him to put on a show while continuing to follow COVID-19 protocols, but also to develop a highly portable work that could be moved and shown in many different environments and locations.

Another aspect of the innovation explored in depth was sound design. Yellow Objects engaged a sound designer, Undescript Pedestrian, who was adept in multi-channel spatial sound design, something that Derek had always wanted to dive into more deeply for a show or an installation. The project investigated the use of 8 to 10 speakers to “conjure up characters in the space” as well as to direct and engage the audience as they experienced the piece.

Independent of the installation, [three short interactive digital stories](#) can be accessed via the rice & beans website.



Derek's passion for this interactive storytelling format stemmed from his interest in video game storytelling. For the project, he learned how to program in Ren'Py, a free python based visual novel engine, which he described as "directing in a different language - a language of pixels". This new digital format also provided Derek with another platform to explore his keen interest in displaying text in live theatre.

The pandemic provided the impetus to implement his long-standing vision for installation work, digital interactive storytelling, and "theatre without live actors". During the pandemic, Derek's career-long obsession with whether one can "put on a show without live actors" was given the space, resources, support, and time it needed.

## **The Challenge: Adapting to audience members' digital support needs**

The main challenge for the project was adapting to audience needs for digital technology support and experience. rice & beans' [interactive story website](#) includes tutorials and instructions to guide users' access to the digital content. Despite this ready availability, older audiences and less digitally savvy users were still less willing and able to access the stories. The user experience of the website, as well as how people find and access the stories, are obstacles that remain to be addressed.

In addition to access issues, Derek felt that he ran out of time to deeply explore some artistic and technical opportunities, including the full sound potential of the piece. In any

future iterations, he plans to allocate time and resources to embed specific sounds into the architecture of the piece and its environment, which would take full advantage of spatial sound opportunities.



## **The Financials: Reaching new audiences while maintaining revenues**

The expansion of the company's audience through the Yellow Objects project, beyond the typical live audience levels for a small theatre company, led to some financial stability for the company but did not lead to substantial revenue growth. Yellow objects reached an audience of



300 people (spread out into small groups) for the exhibition and exceeded 1000 views of the digital stories on the website - a significant increase in audience for the organization.

Derek indicated that the change from traditional theatre to an on-site installation and online digital interactive stories allowed Yellow Objects to reach an expanded audience, including many who might have been intimidated by traditional theatre settings. In a traditional format, someone new to theatre might be hesitant to commit two or more hours for a play that they might not understand or appreciate. The bite-sized digital stories were free and online, requiring only a time commitment of up to 30 minutes each. Derek viewed this as an accessible way for audiences to engage with theatre.

The installation allowed individuals to decide the pace of their own experience as well as to focus on the areas of greatest interest to them. Because of its innovative elements, the installation attracted visual artists and game designers.

However, some participants might have been more comfortable viewing the digital interactive stories than attending the installation, despite its adherence to COVID-19 protocols.

While Yellow Objects did not generate increased revenues, rice & beans theatre was able to move ahead with the digital project during the pandemic and pay the participating artists thanks to the company's multi-year funding for programming from Canada Council for the Arts, BC Arts Council, and City of Vancouver as well as the resilience and emergency funding from the Canada Council for the Arts and the BC Arts Council. The company's technological adaptations meant that they were able to fulfill their obligations to funders to produce work rather than shut down, as was the case for many other theatre companies.

While there is a common perception that technology-driven projects can be very costly, the total expenses for Yellow Objects were comparable to those of a traditional stage play with three-week rehearsals and other associated costs of a live performance, such as space rental. The largest expense for Yellow Objects was the capital expenditure to purchase digital equipment, which rice & beans intends to use again in the future. These expensive up-front purchases are somewhat offset by savings on space rentals.

## **The Takeaways: Storytelling in new forms can build audiences, and sharing learning is key to future success**

For Derek, the main takeaway from Yellow Objects was that “compelling storytelling takes many different forms”. Furthermore, he encouraged Canadian theatre makers and other artists to consider expanding the definition of theatre. For Derek, a wider definition of theatre could help build future audiences, including different types of artists and other theatre goers who might contribute to the further development of storytelling and audience access to theatre experiences.

Derek also emphasized the importance of play and experiment, especially when adapting to a digital environment. Trying new things, failing, succeeding, adapting, and iterating are all important parts of theatre’s innovation process. Not everything that Derek explored was successfully adopted into Yellow Objects, but he does intend to incorporate everything that he has learned into his future work.

Derek also intends to fulfil an important value for him: sharing his learnings with future collaborators and emerging artists. He believes that this is key to the arts sector’s success in the future: “we can’t afford to keep resources and knowledge to ourselves”.

# STEPS Public Art: Building on entrepreneurship and social innovation as a mechanism for neighbourhood support and engagement

Story Seeker: Melanie Fernandez

Person interviewed: Alexis Speer, Executive Director

Interview date: July 30, 2021

**STEPS Public Art**'s mandate is to foster “dynamic and inclusive communities through public art and creative placemaking. [STEPS works to] transform urban spaces into vibrant places through cultural planning, community arts and artist capacity building programs.”

A registered charity that functions as a social enterprise, STEPS' services include cultural plan development, commissioning public art, installation of hoarding exhibits, and animation of local parks. STEPS states that their team connects clients with artists, facilitates calls-for-artists, designs inclusive cultural projects, and generates solutions to public space challenges, with the goals of placemaking, transforming spaces into cultural destinations, strengthening community relationships, and showcasing the talents of diverse Canadian artists.

STEPS is a national organization with staff located in four provinces: Quebec, Ontario, British Columbia, and Manitoba, with Alberta coming online shortly. Their activities build on signature projects such as:

- Equilibrium Mural by artist Okuda San Migel (for Knightstone Capital in Toronto)
- Light Strainers by artists Chris Foster and Layne Hinton (in Toronto at Bloor Street West and Brunswick Avenue)
- Insider Artists by Tara Arnst, Anna Camilleri, Taylor Boileau Davidson, Michel Dumont, Suzi Oram, Jordan Strong, Whyishnave Suthagar, Hilary & Olivia Wheeler, and Anna Wiesen



## The Innovation: Local public art showcasing local businesses

Restrictions to control the spread of COVID-19 resulted in the cancellation of neighbourhood events and festivals and led to dramatic reduction of financial support for artists and businesses alike. Recognizing an opportunity for a creative response, STEPS conceptualized the pilot *2020 Main Street Challenge* and subsequent *I HeART Main Street 2021*.



The *2020 Main Street Challenge* was a collaboration with BIAs to counter the downturn in business, drive traffic and customers, and attract attention to various neighbourhoods, following pandemic-related decreases. A central objective was also to pay and support artists and artistic activity during a troubling time for artists. Before the pandemic, many BIAs ran large and successful events that engaged many artists and brought many people into various neighbourhoods. As a result of the pandemic, these events were all cancelled. STEPS viewed this as an opportunity to explore some new methods of neighbourhood engagement and new partnerships.



To this end, STEPS collaborated with the Canadian Urban Institute and associations of BIAs in Toronto and Peel Region to help shape the project. Eleven BIAs in Toronto and Peel Region ended up participating: Cabbagetown, Chinatown, Danforth Mosaic, Downtown Yonge, Fairbank Village, Gerrard India Bazaar, Leslieville, Malton, Port Credit, Riverside, and York-Eglinton.



Participating artists included Bareket Kezwer, Caitlin Taguibao, Duncan C. McLean, Erin McCluskey, Fatspatrol, Gosia Komorski, Heidi Berton, Isaiah Haber, Jenn Kitagawa, Jieun June Kim, Lauren Pirie, Lindsay Hill, Linh Thai, Marco Bertuzzo, Michael Brobbey, Nick Sweetman, Rosena Fung, Roshni Wijayasinha, Selina McCallum, Sue Todd, Vesna Asanovic, Wendy Cheng, and Yshmael Cabana.

Overall, the pilot project facilitated:

- 204 site activations
- 41 new art works
- the payment of 25 artists and designers (\$36,500 in total)
- \$25,500 of in-kind support to BIAs

Building on the success of the *2020 Main Street Art Challenge*, STEPS launched *I HeART Main Street* in 2021 to support BIAs of all sizes, strengthen business-community relationships, and provide meaningful opportunities for local Canadian artists during the pandemic.

A call for proposals was launched along with direct outreach and information sessions, and 50 BIAs applied. A short list of 27 large and small BIAs from across Ontario were selected to implement placemaking initiatives as part of a main street recovery strategy. The 27 participating BIAs are: Albion Islington Square, Aldershot Village, Belle River – On the Lake, Burlington Downtown Business Association, Chinatown, Clarkson Village, Cooksville, Downtown Bench Beamsville, Downtown Brockville, Downtown Tillsonburg, Downtown Timmins, Downtown Whitby, DUKE Heights, Fairbank Village, Greektown on the Danforth, Kensington Market, Lakeshore Village, Leslieville, MarkeTO District, Mimico by the Lake, Mount Pleasant Village, Oakwood Village, Pape Village, Port Credit, Riverside, Trinity Bellwoods, and Upper Village.



The project's supports include:

- Pro-bono creative placemaking and public art services
- Connections to multidisciplinary artists and creatives
- Artist fee subsidies
- Audio-visual documentation
- Promotional tools and public programming



STEPS is contributing project frameworks and management, in-depth documentation services, as well as the collection of key metrics and other evaluative tools. The findings will support BIAs in building cases for arts and cultural activities through quantitative and qualitative evaluations. In addition, STEPS is contributing to marketing, promotion, and inclusion efforts through a newly developed (but not yet available) mobile app, so that visitors can find the BIA public art projects and the stories from across the province.

Beginning in June 2021, 27 main streets across Ontario were activated through unique outdoor public art installations that can be visited in person or virtually through an interactive app. Participating BIAs will have a chance to win prizes valued at \$30,000 at the end of the summer to recognize exemplary projects. The project video can be viewed at <https://stepspublicart.org/project/main-street-art-challenge/>.

STEPS staff believe that the implementation of a pilot project enabled them to test the processes and frameworks and gather data to move forward with a larger scope, such as the addition of an app. New funding opportunities were also identified, while new partners such as the City of Toronto approached STEPS on their own. The collection of documentation and data also allowed the BIAs to advocate more effectively within their own municipalities.

The STEPS team worked closely with BIAs to realize projects, and documentation and data collection were critical to animating the project. A further benefit of the project for STEPS and their partners was the forging of relationships outside the GTA, particularly with communities where there is no municipal support for public art. This demonstrates the potential for national participation in the project.



## **The Challenges: Funding and rethinking how to deploy a team**

There were several challenges that had to be overcome as the project unfolded. On the funding side, significant revenues had to be generated for this project, because STEPS receives only modest operational funding from the Ontario Arts Council. All project costs were supported through fundraising efforts and the funders noted below.

The project is also staff resource intensive. To manage this, the STEPS team had each of their six staff members steward 4 to 5 BIA projects. Two of the same staff facilitated the intake process, and an additional 2 to 3 membered engagement team worked on documentation and storytelling.

While the STEPS team works from the Toronto office, project sites are distributed across the province. As such, the team had to find innovative ways to work virtually and still be “place-based” without physically being there. Ultimately, STEPS believes that they were able to break free from their own constraints and generate new opportunities.

## **The Financials: Innovative operational structures and project fundraising**

STEPS’ entrepreneurial approach and social-enterprise framework allow the organization to identify opportunities in non-traditional sectors and through innovative partnerships. STEPS’ dedication to documentation, data collection, and evaluation enables them to position the arts as a business case, a community/city-building enterprise, a creative endeavour, a tourism enhancement, and an equity initiative.

STEPS was able to leverage a range of funding resources from the public and private sectors to support the project as well as bring additional resources to regional artists through the support of the BIAs.

The 2020 pilot project received funding from RBC Royal Bank, which supported:

- a portion of the artist fees
- consulting and management expertise from STEPS at no cost to the BIA
- marketing and promotion

The BIAs paid the costs of materials as well as a portion of the artist fees (to the extent possible).

The project expansion in 2021 was funded by RBC Royal Bank, Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, and the Government of Canada’s Canadian Healthy Communities Initiative fund. The City of Toronto through its Economic Development Department also approached STEPS to support and participate in the project.

## **The Takeaway: Remain nimble**

STEPS' social enterprise construct enabled the organization to remain nimble and responsive and to identify innovative opportunities when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. The staff team structures enable STEPS to facilitate projects through a tight project management process to maximize output while allowing staff to have ownership over projects.

STEPS has built long term partnerships with foundations and corporate partners. These partnerships are nurtured and lead to trusting relationships with the STEPS team. When approached to participate in new opportunities, the partners and supporters are confident about the quality of the projects and innovation of the STEPS team and are eager to support new ideas.

# The Strata Festival's Student Composer Symposium: Training young artists during a challenging time

Story Seeker: Kelly Hill

Person interviewed: Paul Suchan, Artistic Director

Interview held: July 28, 2021

Saskatoon-based Strata Festival of New Music has three prongs to its programming, all of which are focused on composers from Saskatchewan and the rest of Canada: 1) live performances of classical, jazz, electro-acoustic, and other contemporary musical forms; 2) unique performances featuring works that require unusual venues and configurations of instruments, such as a concert for seven pianos or one featuring the lowest acoustic instruments in Saskatchewan; and 3) educational and professional development opportunities for musicians, typically in the form of in-person workshops or masterclasses. The small festival has a total budget of less than \$25,000, including in-kind support.

## The Innovation: Creating an online composing symposium – in a month

In 2020, for the first time, the Strata Festival offered an online Student Composer Symposium as its educational component. Students had the opportunity to compose a short piece of jazz under the mentorship of well-known Canadian composers, including David Braid, Mike Rud, Beth McKenna, and Alexis Normand. The student compositions were recorded live (with physical distancing in place) and received an online premiere.



Artistic Director Paul Suchan noted that this inaugural Student Composer Symposium was delivered “about a month” after Festival organizers came up with this new idea for a “mostly



online” workshop experience during the pandemic. While he recognized that “exciting” might not be the best word to use during a pandemic, Paul indicated that “there was something sort of exciting about it, in trying to organize something like this. It was new, and we had never done anything like this before.”

One unintended benefit: the Symposium drew the interest of a large number of composers and musicians, because it was happening just as many artists had lost all of their creative and performing opportunities. “We were able to search out some of the best jazz composers in Canada, and they all jumped at the opportunity,” Paul said.

Student participation was relatively high in the first iteration of the Student Composer Symposium: 20 participants in 2020. In 2021, after Zoom fatigue had set in among many, there were 14 participants.

Paul indicated that the digital format allowed for more in-depth interaction between students and teaching composers:

*I think that, overall, the educational benefits are greater with this symposium [than with an in-person masterclass]. It's more time that [the students] get to write a new piece under guidance, from a guest composer. They have lots of chances to interact. It was four or five sessions, whereas a masterclass is just one session, maybe 10-15 minutes with your piece.*

## **The Challenge: Learning to livestream – in a month**

The Strata Festival had a steep learning curve to climb, and quickly: “We had never livestreamed a concert. We never video-recorded a concert. We had never premiered a concert online,” noted Paul.

Money was not a significant challenge for the Festival, because it had a grant from SK Arts (previously known as the Saskatchewan Arts Board) which could be used for nearly any purpose related to new music.

Once the Festival decided to have an online symposium, the challenge became finding the right people to help out within their budget range. According to Paul, the Festival’s audio needs were easily taken care of: “The audio part of it, we had that cased. We have good people in town here that like to work with us, so that was no problem.”

As he put it, finding the right video expertise was more challenging for a festival lacking in online experience, particularly with its strong emphasis on paying artists:

*If you have enough money, it's really easy to get really good video from really good video editors. But then, at what point does that start to eat up enough of your budget that you're taking it away from maybe performers or composers, or you're increasing the fees. So thought has to be put into ‘we want this to be good quality, but where's the line for us’. That was kind of tricky, to know how much money to spend on an extra thing that we had never done before.*

Despite being able to offer the online symposium in both 2020 and 2021, Paul still believes that there is value in the human interactions that occur during in-person encounters. As such, the next edition of the symposium will likely follow a hybrid model:

*We will have probably two or three of the composers still online and then maybe bring one or two [to Saskatoon]. There's still something intangible about actually having a human being in the room with you. You know, it's just not possible to replicate that. The hangout aspect of festivals is actually more important than people give it credit for. How many ideas are hatched when, after the concert, you're hanging out with the composer or some of the musicians, and you're talking about how it went? You don't do that with an online concert in much the same capacity. People tend to hit "End Meeting" right away.*

Beyond the next symposium, the Festival may return to masterclasses, at least in some circumstances. For example, the development of a piece of classical music would take longer than developing a shorter jazz piece (which is what the Festival focused on in 2020).

The Strata Festival did not offer a live performance in 2020 (other than the online performance of the student compositions) but did livestream a "low instruments" concert in 2021, which reached a larger audience than the Festival would normally attract. An in-person concert exploring the relationship between visual and aural art was also presented in 2021. Some mix of livestream and in-person concerts will likely continue in future years.

## **The Financials: Provincial operating funding and cost savings from being online**

The Festival was able to pivot quickly because it had stability in its main funding source, [SK Arts](#). The provincial arts funder asked the Festival to keep its staff employed, even with reduced programming in 2020. SK Arts also extended the Festival's two-year operating funding (of \$10,000) by an additional year, meaning that the Festival would only have to re-apply in the spring of 2022 for activities starting in 2023.

The Student Composer Symposium charges a fee of \$100 for each student.

Because the Festival was virtual in 2020, it had lower costs for travel, distribution, and marketing. Regarding travel, the Festival did not have to pay for the flights and accommodation of composers from Montreal, Toronto, and British Columbia. (However, composer-mentors were paid a higher fee in 2020 to reflect the increased time spent mentoring students.) To distribute its livestream, the Festival used YouTube, which is free. Most of the Festival's 2020 and 2021 marketing needs were met through Facebook, which was less expensive than the costs that they would normally incur to print and distribute posters and pamphlets.



## The Takeaway: Staff and funding flexibility are key

For Paul, funding flexibility...

*really opens up the world for innovation.... We didn't know if we would actually have enough registration funds to pay for all the teachers, but with enough funding from [SK Arts], we didn't have to worry about that. We could sort of jump in the deep end of the pool and say 'okay, let's just do this'.*

The funding flexibility allowed the Festival's part-time, seasonal staff members to stay in touch with the Festival and keep it in their calendars for 2021. Paul indicated that his staff members represented the second key aspect of flexibility: many of them pivoted quickly or even took on different roles in 2020. For example, even with quick turnaround times due to the sudden shift online, the Festival's marketing person was able to create and post Facebook ads quickly.

As Paul summed up, "those two things basically ensured that we were still able to do something in 2020, and they also set us up for 2021."

## Tangled Art + Disability's Crip Times: A podcast series that enhances awareness and engagement

Story Seeker: Melanie Fernandez

Person interviewed: Kayla Besse and Kristina McMullin, hosts of Crip Times podcast

Interview date: August 23, 2021

Created in 2003 as a result of the very successful Abilities Arts Festival, [Tangled Art + Disability](#) works to enhance opportunities for artists with disabilities and to ensure that they are an integral part of the cultural fabric of society. Tangled Art + Disability offers opportunities for exhibition, artists-in-residence programs, master classes, seminars, and other professional development.

The organization's mission and mandate illustrates the broad spectrum of the work that they undertake:

*Tangled Art + Disability is boldly redefining how the world experiences art and those who create it. We are a not for profit art + disability organization dedicated to connecting professional and emerging artists, the arts community and a diverse public through creative passion and artistic excellence. Our mandate is to support Deaf, Mad and disability-identified artists, to cultivate Deaf, Mad and disability arts in Canada, and to enhance access to the arts for artists and audiences of all abilities.*

In addition to the events and activities they produce, Tangled Art + Disability has created [invaluable resources \(toolkits and research\)](#) that help organizations work with artists and audiences with disabilities.

### The Innovation: A podcast series providing new levels of access

Reflecting on having to close its space and halt its programming as a result of COVID-19, Tangled Art + Disability was very concerned about how to maintain a connection with artists and ease the sense of isolation that already impacts their communities. The [Crip Times Podcast Series](#) was launched and is described as follows:

*Disabled people have long been experts at staying at home, and getting creative with new ways to stay in community with one another. At the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown, many of us were wondering how we could maintain the sense of intimacy and connection that we get from gathering in crip arts spaces. Out of this desire, Crip Times was born: a new interview podcast series.*

The podcast was produced and hosted by Yousef Kadoura, Kayla Besse, and Kristina McMullin. The artist trio had never produced a podcast before and learned a great deal through trial and error. They brainstormed ideas for topics and discussed options of a live broadcast series versus a podcast format. They wanted to make all decisions in very intentional ways with their audiences in mind. A podcast format was selected because of its accessibility and the partners who could assist with technical help and additional expertise. A larger resource team was formed with two

key partners: the [University of Guelph](#) and [Bodies in Translation](#). The team was able to create content that was accessible to a broad range of participants and abilities. In addition to developing the podcast storylines using techniques from the Tangled Art + Disability workshop series on digital storytelling, the team integrated the technical aspects required for production and accessibility.



Kayla, Kristina, and Yousef were all working from home during the period of production. They decided to work as a collective, as they would for a collaborative arts project. The project helped sustain them creatively through the pandemic and blurred the lines between the personal, political, and professional.

Past artist conversations from Tangled exhibitions and the second Sunday social (a Tangled program) helped them understand the intimate feel that they hoped to create with the podcast. The trio used the podcast format to overcome geographic boundaries and open up presentations to art forms that don't fit into gallery sessions. They were able to recruit [guests who they may not otherwise have been able to reach](#), such as: Dr. Ben Barry, Chair of Fashion at Ryerson University discussing imaging fashion beyond the ideal body; Ryan O'Connell, creator, writer and star of Netflix's *Special*; Gloria Swain, who speaks about making art as an older, Mad, Black, female artist and activist; and so many more.



claudio wittman performing Minimal Action

The feedback on Crip Times has been very positive, and the series is now being used by OCAD University both as a teaching curriculum unit and as part of the audio exhibition [How will we be with you?](#). The podcast series is hosted on Andrew Gurza's Wheels on the Ground podcast network, on Spotify and Apple. The series has also been picked up by University of British Columbia radio.

## The Challenge: Learning curves and production delays

The main challenge for the project was the team's steep learning curve related to the technology for podcast production. As the series evolved, Kayla, Kristina, and Yousef felt that their engagement goals and quality of the engagement were becoming clearer. They acknowledge that the series took much longer to produce than they had anticipated, and the launch was moved from August to November 2020. They all had other jobs and projects, which required schedule adjustments to ensure a truly collaborative process.

## The Financials: Reaching out across boundaries with new voices and ideas

Given that Tangled Art + Disability's physical spaces were closed during the pandemic, funds for the project could be repurposed from the organization's operational budget. Tangled receives federal, provincial, and municipal funding, as well as corporate and foundation support, earned revenues, coproduction support, and donations.

Artist fees average approximately \$100,000 per year to support exhibitions, residencies, workshops, professional development, and special projects.

## The Takeaway: Storytelling in a new format facilitating broader and richer engagement

Yousef Kadoura, Kayla Besse, and Kristina McMullin are a dynamic team of artists with an extensive knowledge of their communities. As a result of their expertise, they were able to bring together a group of talented partners (University of Guelph, Bodies in Translation, Wheels on the Ground, Ryerson University, and others) to bring the series to fruition and ensure maximum accessibility.

Kayla, Kristina, and Yousef believe that they would not have produced a podcast series had it not been for the pandemic. The circumstances pushed them to find new ways of being together, engaging, and prioritizing access for their communities. The artists, scholars, and activists who participated in the podcast series all shared remarkable insights related to isolation as a daily part of their lives, in contrast to the larger mainstream community that was experiencing this for the first time.

The podcast's insights and format offered powerful testaments and gave voice to an often marginalized community. Tangled is considering how they can continue the podcast series given the extensive human resources that it took to produce.

As noted by artist Cindy Baker in episode 4 of the Crip Times Podcast:

*I feel like I have better skills for dealing with this kind of thing—the pandemic—and what it does to our brains and our bodies, because of the fact that, as disabled people, we deal with these kinds of pressures all the time.*

*These are things that Crip folks, disabled folks, have been advocating for a really long time. Things like remote work, things like captioning and digital meetings etc. so forth, and now they are being seen as essential because also disabled and non-disabled need them. And it's kind of just interesting that this pandemic has shifted the way uh, we view needs in terms of serving folks in isolated spaces which, there had been a lot of disabled folks who were then isolated due to ableism in our society long before this pandemic started.*



## **Théâtre Cercle Molière's *Festival théâtre jeunesse*: Making theatre and connecting youth virtually**

Story Seekers: Myriam Benzakour-Durand and Blanche Israël

Person interviewed: Alison Palmer, school programming and training

Interview date: July 12, 2021

Théâtre Cercle Molière (TCM) is a theatre company approaching its centennial anniversary. Established in Winnipeg in 1925, it aims to use francophone theatre and culture to bring Manitobans together. TCM considers itself one of the major drivers of Franco-Manitoban cultural life.

For more than 50 years, in addition to its regular programming, the Théâtre Cercle Molière has offered its annual Festival théâtre jeunesse (FTJ), featuring theatrical creations, celebrations, and opportunities for pre-secondary and high school students to interact with each other. During the week-long festival, about 30 francophone schools participate in a valuable and rewarding experience that introduces them to the theatre arts and invites them to create plays, while also giving Franco-Manitoban youth a chance to network with their peers.

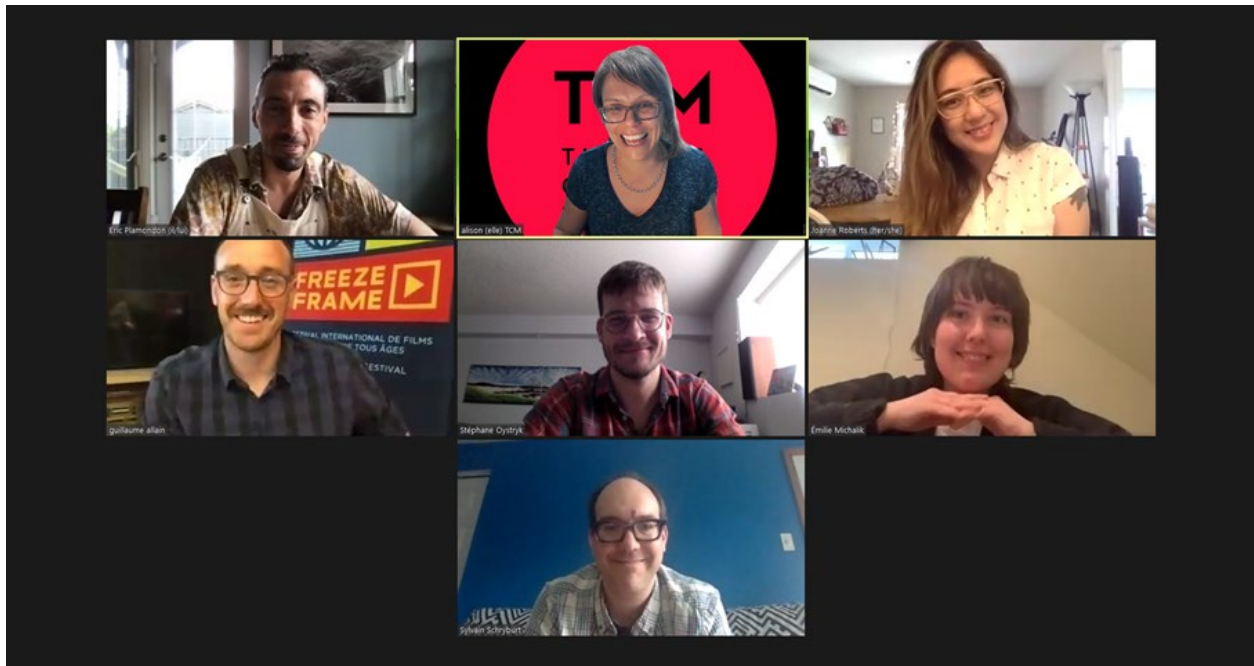
### **The Innovations: An inaugural virtual festival and closer working relationships with teachers**

Before the pandemic, the groups gathered at the Centre culturel franco-manitobain to present their plays in front of the other schools, receive feedback from a jury, and participate in a week of celebrations. During the week of the festival, two days and two evenings are devoted to the middle school students (7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade), followed by two days and two evenings for the high school students (10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade). The festival culminates in a gala on Friday night, featuring an awards ceremony, music, and a special theme.

In 2021, TCM was determined to offer at least one version of the FTJ, despite the pandemic. As Alison Palmer, director of school programming, explained, “Regardless of the number of registrations, regardless of the format, we knew we wanted to offer a space where people could share their creations and meet other young people.” The festival still didn’t have a website, so TCM’s first step was to create an online platform for the festival, with a voting zone, a section for photos, and a chatroom that allowed the students to share their bloopers and behind-the-scenes moments, encouraging their peers to view and vote for their projects.

“From the beginning,” Alison said, “we had to consider the fact that it would have to be filmed if we weren’t going to be able to get together in person.” So TCM forged a brand-new partnership with Freeze Frame, a media arts centre for young people in Manitoba that presents the International Film Festival for Kids of All Ages each spring, in which youth learn to create short films.





TCM and Freeze Frame joined forces to offer all interested schools a series of six workshops to prepare for the FTJ, three of which were focused on filmmaking (screenwriting, filming, and editing), and three of which were focused on theatre (playwriting, acting, and staging). Altogether, more than 75 virtual workshops were presented to more than 450 students.

The workshops led up to the virtual FTJ, which took place in May 2021 and presented 19 filmed projects on the festival website. The youth could view the films, give each other scores, participate in the chat, and attend the gala, which included an awards ceremony, on Friday night on Zoom.

Alison said that, for TCM, “working on these platforms was entirely new. It really pushed us.” However, she feels that it was definitely worth the effort and that they will retain at least some of the format in the future because being virtual means it’s widely accessible. “We like to be there in person, but that isn’t always possible,” she said. Thanks to the virtual format, for example, “there are schools in very remote locations that would like to benefit from our training, and this offers them a good alternative.”

TCM adapted to the new technologies in house, whereas it went out of house for the expertise required to present a top-notch gala. “We learned how to use the platforms. We only hired other people for our gala. We did a livestream, it was super cool. We could see that the young people were really excited.” The awards ceremony was planned so that it would be similar to the in-person version, with a dynamic host who encouraged the youth to dance. Each student could be seen in their own Zoom frame dancing and participating in the event. “I don’t think we could get any more real than that,” Alison said.

## The Challenges: Adaptations and community consultations

In order to prepare for the event, TCM had to forge even closer working relationships with the teachers throughout the school year. “We had to support the teachers, have a lot of [one-on-ones], phone calls, emails,” Alison noted. This allowed TCM to shape its virtual festival. Alison said, “The other version of the FTJ was really a well-oiled machine. There weren’t that many consultations,” whereas the new version of the FTJ required us to constantly adapt and give it more special attention. “Are the students at home? At school? Half and half? If they’re at school, do they each have their own screen or are they all in front of the same computer for the entire class? We really had to adapt,” Alison explained. The need for follow-up was greater. “We trained the teachers, we equipped them. There was a lot more follow-up where we could see the progress of each school and talk about it.” The feedback and follow-up with the teachers and students was an aspect of the virtual festival that Alison would like to keep in the future.

Regarding the difficulties presented by the project, Alison adopted an improvisational philosophy that is typical of her artistic field. “There were some mistakes,” she said, “but it’s like in theatre – when you miss a cue, that’s what makes it human and real. It was touching to think back on it later. It wasn’t all perfectly polished.”



## **The Financials: Preparing for unexpected costs and providing visibility for the sponsors**

Alison stressed that, even during a normal year, “the FTJ was never an activity designed to make money.” The festival depends on funding, grants, sponsors, and partners. The new virtual festival did not lose money, despite the fact that it was offered free of charge to schools for the first time in its history. “Everything was well planned, and we stayed within our funding budget. We were able to offer it for free, with some great gifts [for the students] at the end.”

However, Alison explained that there’s no guarantee of lower costs when you make this kind of festival virtual. “It costs just as much, if not more, because you have to consider the technical equipment, the creation of the videos for the website, the company we hired for the gala, the free workshops. All these little things add up.”

In terms of visibility, they had to find new ways to recognize donors. The organization created a donor recognition section on the new festival website to highlight the contributions made by sponsors and public funders. In addition, the virtual awards ceremony was a new showcase for donors. “Everyone who awarded prizes at the gala was a sponsor,” Alison remarked.

There were promotional benefits to making the project virtual. The traffic on the FTJ website gave TCM the opportunity to publicize its other projects, such as its Marathon de création, and encourage young people to participate in them.

## **The Takeaways: A hybrid format, an increase in community consultations, and non-traditional partnerships**

Alison anticipates that the FTJ, which was without a website before the pandemic, will be presented as a hybrid event from now on, with an in-person gala with the option to attend remotely. A hybrid format would allow the festival to lower the costs for the schools, while still maintaining the collective creative spirit. “It’s true that a workshop where you act, where you create, it’s fun to be there [in person]. But so much is possible [in a virtual format] with smaller budgets from the schools. No need to have an artist come in, for example.”

After doing festivals for 50 years, the organization had lost the habit of consulting with the various parties involved. “That’s maybe something that was missing,” Alison said. The benefits of ongoing consultations with the participating teachers and students were undeniable. The student committee, the surveys of representatives at each school, and the one-on-one meetings with the teachers will be retained in order to evaluate the festival’s success as well as to consider changes in the future.

Alison noted that the pandemic gave the FTJ the opportunity to open up to partnerships and collaborations that either hadn’t been possible or had never been considered before. “There is always a solution, maybe not the one we’re used to or the one that has always been the best. Sometimes it’s good to get completely away from what we’re accustomed to doing to see the possibilities.” By being open and communicating with other organizations who have a similar vision, she found that they could easily align with each other and create something new together.

## Tupiq Arctic Circus Troupe: Circus for social change

Story Seeker: Blanche Israël

People interviewed: Christopher Angatookalook, Tupiq ACT performer; Véronique Provencher, Manager

Interview held: July 23, 2021

The Tupiq Arctic Circus Troupe (Tupiq ACT) is a multidisciplinary group of professional Inuit circus artists from the region of Nunavik in Northern Quebec. The group came together at the Cirqiniq Program, an eight-day circus arts camp offered by the Kativik Regional Government to teens in communities across Northern Quebec since 2009. In 2018, a group of Cirqiniq graduates formed Tupiq ACT, an all-Inuit circus troupe that splits its time between Montreal and Nunavik. Tupiq ACT's mission is to promote Inuit culture through contemporary circus, to highlight the depth of Inuit culture, to challenge assumptions around the North/South divide, and above all, to present Inuit youth with positive role models.

In early 2020, Tupiq ACT became a partner in the Pirursiivik Greenhouse and Social Art Project (Pirursiivik meaning “a place to grow” in Inuktitut), which aims to promote healthy eating habits in the North. Tupiq ACT's contribution to the Pirursiivik Greenhouse and Social Art Project was to develop a social education element - helping to shape attitudes towards food among Inuit youth. The troupe was tasked with developing a circus production for kids that would offer a fun vehicle to promote increased vegetable portions within the traditional Inuit diet, which focuses on wild meats, fish, and fowl. The production included Inuit legends and games, clowning, and juggling.



### The Innovation: Pivoting the art form and staying true to the language

When the troupe could not tour the circus production to Nunavik as planned, it decided to convert the live production to a film production.

The group's first step was to engage contributors with the necessary experience to go digital. For example, the troupe hired technicians who had experience filming circus specifically, but quickly learned that the change in the presentation format would require a pivot in the artistic approach. “With film, you have to do the same thing many times to get different camera angles,” says Tupiq ACT Manager Véronique Provencher. “It has to be structured differently than a circus performance.” Having a strong team of experienced technicians behind them allowed the artists to adapt the performance to film confidently.



The film was created in the Nunavik region's dialect of Inuktitut, in keeping with Tupiq ACT's mission to offer learning resources in a language that the community recognizes.

## The Challenge: Embracing learning curves

The switch from live performance to film was complex for the troupe, involving: a period of physical reconditioning for the artists who had not trained in over six months; creative workarounds of the tight COVID-19 restrictions in Quebec; dealing with mask-wearing while performing challenging circus stunts; and learning about film production from scratch.



Tupiq ACT performer and administrator Chris Angatookalook embraced the shift to the new medium as an opportunity to try video editing, which involved a significant learning curve and a lot of time. “It’s definitely something I am going to have to learn from scratch, to find the software that works for me. I am learning the basics.” This being said, Chris emphasizes that he enjoyed the challenge: “I had a blast doing it. I want to start doing it more regularly. Our development is something I personally want to document, edit, and put out there.”

Though Tupiq ACT had no experience with filming circus performances before the pandemic, the artists, who are all between the ages of 20 and 30, chose to lean into the pivot to film as an opportunity to showcase their creativity. “We definitely had a bit more freedom doing it on video,” says Chris. “When you do circus live, you have one shot at getting it right. But when you do it on video, you can fix it, take two minutes to breathe. You can play with it - get a wide shot, do a repetition at a different angle or with a different camera lens. It gives you a lot more creativity.”

The artists' curiosity and willingness to learn also helped when it came to an oft forgotten aspect of video: subtitling. "We try to keep things in our language - Inuktitut from Nunavik - as much as possible. We had subtitles underneath in French and English so that people could follow the story." However, this process posed its own challenges. The subtitling was first done from Inuktitut into English, and then from English into French. This meant that by the time the French subtitles were uploaded, certain descriptions no longer corresponded accurately with the video content. "That in itself was interesting, because the way we speak in Inuktitut is specific and doesn't always translate. It was quite a learning process and required a lot of reviewing," says Chris. Having the artists directly involved in the digitalizing process allowed corrections and changes to be made, so that viewers were getting a true translation of the intention of the instructional content, not just a strict translation of the words.



With the artists in lockdown in Montreal, the troupe had to navigate heavy COVID-19 restrictions, including performing with masks and defining a small bubble of artists and staff. "Space rental was quite a puzzle because a lot of spaces had a lot of restrictions where we could not work as a team in the space," says Véronique. "We had to find a space that could accommodate us as a bubble with masks, which required quite a bit of reflection."

Through many challenges, the artists brought a characteristic resilience and a can-do attitude to the project that defined the way that they navigated the difficult pandemic year, and life in general. "Resilience is a big thing for these guys," says Véronique. "They are resilient from their past. They have all experienced traumatic experiences and have risen from it. They kept their spirits up through whatever was happening."

## **The Financials: Putting dedicated staff into grant writing and partnerships**

Tupiq ACT had secured grants from the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ) before the pandemic, so the key focus for the troupe was to build on its early-stage momentum. The organization hired specific people to generate new revenue sources, including an administrator who focused on forging partnerships and a grant writer who helped them secure two production grants and organizational development grants from Avataq Cultural Institute and CALQ.

Before the pandemic, Tupiq ACT had forged a partnership with One Drop Foundation, a circus-focused social art foundation that is the brainchild of Cirque du Soleil founder Guy Laliberté. This enabled the troupe to remain active throughout the pandemic, even at such an early stage in its organizational history. In addition, new partnerships and clients emerged through the pandemic. For example, the circus arts festival La TOHU reached out to invite the troupe to perform. This and other performance opportunities will allow Tupiq ACT to bring in performance fees to



compensate and raise the profile of its artists, as well as to supplement its grant income as the company continues to grow.

## **The Takeaways: Leaning on core values and community**

Tupiq ACT's approach to pivoting during the pandemic is a model of how to apply traditional Inuit ways of knowing to contemporary contexts. Centering its approach around its community's values allowed the troupe to stay grounded through a tumultuous time. "COVID was a platform that showed how we have to adapt to the environment all the time as people," says Chris. "That environment includes not just the physical world; it also includes social media."

Chris and Véronique also identify Tupiq ACT's robust partnerships as a core element of its success. "To a lot of youth wanting to start a project: find good partners," says Véronique. "This was a key thing for this organization: to ask for help and to be reliable." Tupiq ACT was able to achieve success during a difficult time because it insisted on delivering on its pre-pandemic promises to its partners, even when circumstances had drastically changed. This is proving to be a good investment in the company's future.

The company acknowledges its social and political context, with Indigenous arts being in the spotlight, especially in the North. "Our organization is receiving a lot of positive attention right now," says Véronique. "The next years will be exciting." The troupe kept its focus by prioritizing the needs of its artists. The project, says Véronique, "was a great way to work together, to be together as a team, despite the various measures that had to be taken to make it happen. It meant a lot to everyone's mental health."

Chris offers sound advice for a tumultuous time: "Even when you can't find your next step, take that step anyway and see where it takes you."

## Video Pool Media Arts Centre: Nurturing community of care to impact change in the artist-run centre model

Story Seeker: Anju Singh

Person interviewed: Emma Hendrix, Executive Director

Interview dates: July 14 and 19, 2021

Like many artist-serving organizations, Video Pool Media Arts Centre (VP) faced challenges to continue meeting artists' needs throughout the pandemic. When provincial health restrictions came into effect in Manitoba, this Winnipeg-based organization was required to shut down many of its services, disrupting support for artists who relied on VP for equipment rentals, training, and facilities. However, VP's team, led by Executive Director Emma Hendrix, viewed these restrictions as an opportunity to gain deeper insights into the access barriers that VP's members have been facing since before the pandemic.

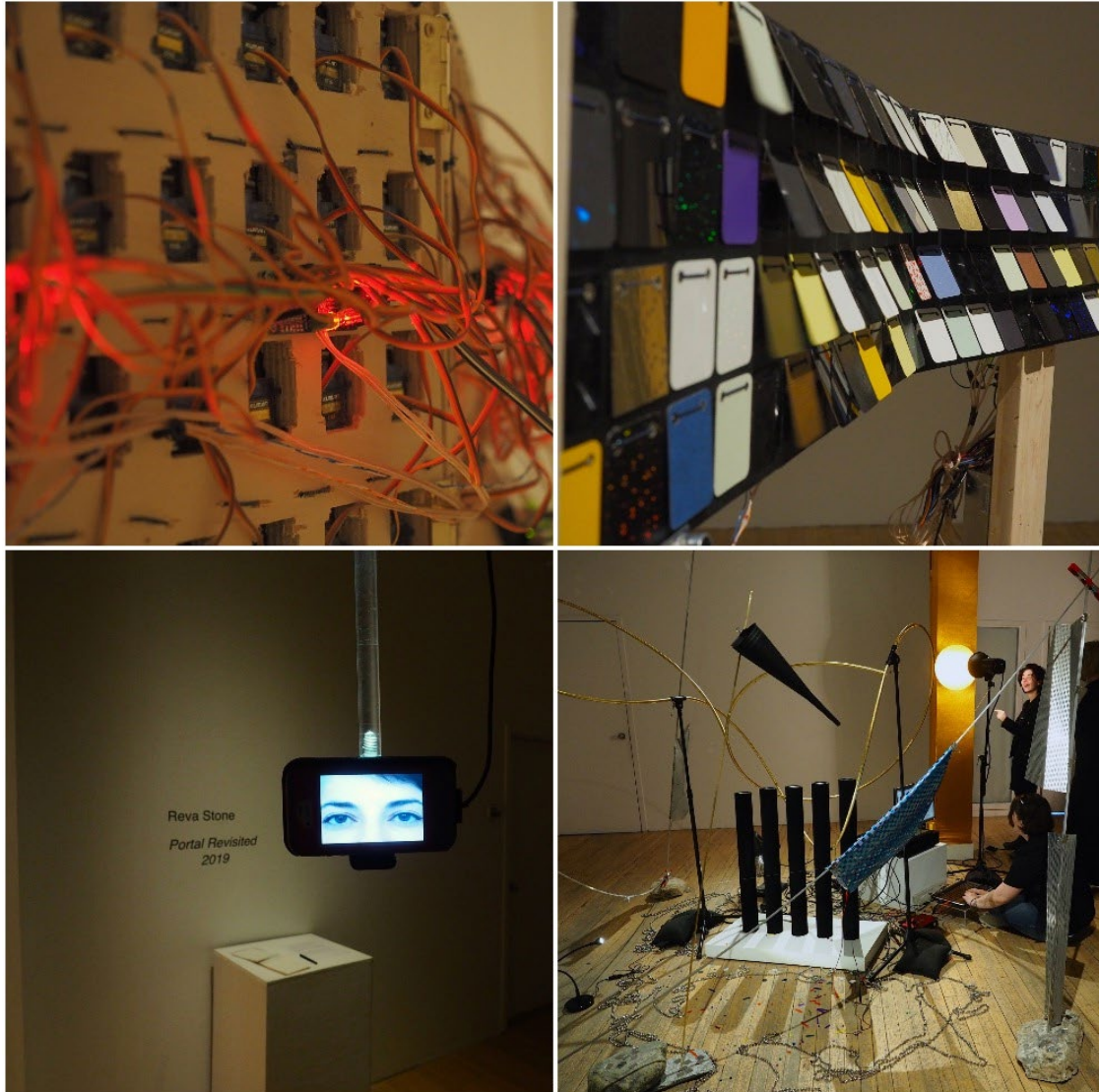
Based on his previous experience leading artist-run centres, Emma was already aware of some of the access issues with which organizations like VP grappled, such as ensuring that the venue, studios, and workshops are accessible. For him, "the concept of access was just highlighted [for VP] because of the pandemic, so it gave us a new way to think about these things".

These insights ultimately steered the organization to explore new ways to run its operations and deliver its programs and services. As VP reflected on the question, "How do we change the way we work, given the way things are during the pandemic?", the centre engaged in adaptive and flexible thinking, which led to significant changes in the artist-run centre's processes and approaches.

### **The Innovation: A thorough self-assessment with an eye to "What does an artist-run centre look like in 50 years?"**

Video Pool's equity and inclusion work informs the solutions and intentions of its response to pandemic-related obstacles. By listening to the communities that it serves, including artists in Manitoba's rural and urban communities, VP is able to ask large and meaningful questions like what the future of artist-run centres should and could be in 50 years and what a decentralized, more accessible, and virtual centre could look like.

During the pandemic, a key realization for VP was that artist-run centres need to reflect on their role in the larger arts community and assess their effectiveness after decades of standardized structures and models. Emma reflected that, "because nobody could access the space during the pandemic, and it wasn't safe to be trading gear off [for equipment rentals], and legally we weren't allowed to, we started to think about how this highlighted that this is how it is for some people all the time."



VP took the opportunity to review access restrictions that impacted the artists served, and the centre wanted to ensure that any improvements to the accessibility of its programs and services would continue beyond the pandemic. Emma explained that a combination of factors moved VP in the right direction to make significant changes: “examining the physical barriers to access due to the pandemic (pandemic access restrictions, physical proximity barriers, even the uncertainty of what was safe) combined with anti-oppression workshops with Future Ancestors Society and a Disability Justice workshop with Melanie Monoceros”.

One area of focus for the organization was its education programs. The stability afforded through emergency funding from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Winnipeg Foundation, and federal emergency programs allowed VP to shift its resources toward the development of a free online workshop series entitled “VP Learning Laboratories”, led by Heidi Phillips. This series provided professional development opportunities to artists at home during the pandemic and offered much needed income for the facilitating artists at a time when there was little to no work due to the pandemic.

While Emma doesn't think of the Learning Laboratories as a technical innovation *per se* -- the workshops were "still just on zoom" -- the positive response to the virtual format encouraged VP to seek funding to further expand its workshops into a "HyFlex" (Hybrid-Flexible) learning approach. Emma explained that:

*The basic idea is that it's a flexible learning environment with both online and in-person options, and these options are flexible in that a student should be able to participate in either way at any time and get the same learning experience. For VP, we want to be able to host workshops that are theoretical and practical/hands-on and offer outreach to people outside of Winnipeg.*

Thanks to the virtual format during the pandemic, the centre did see workshop participants from a broader geographic area, including some from outside of Manitoba. VP is working closely with consultants to develop this learning approach to ensure that it meets the needs of the centre's artist communities.





Video Pool first had the opportunity to experience HyFlex models of learning through its participation in the [Digital Dramaturgy Initiative \(DDI\)](#) - a partnership that VP participated in with the Manitoba Association of Playwrights (MAP). A chance encounter with a playwright participating in the initiative where VP was providing technical and conceptual support for artists provided VP with the opportunity to learn about HyFlex learning, which inspired VP to aspire to “post-pandemic, support folks who want to come in person and those who want to join online -- with accessibility and equity in mind”.

Informed by these experiences, Video Pool, led by Technical Director Eusebio Lopez-Aguilar, developed a portable equipment rental service/program, including laptops, livestreaming kits, and video kits. These portable kits complement or replace the desktop studio computers currently provided in VP’s facility, by allowing artists to work remotely in a COVID-safe way. The equipment was photographed, weighed, and measured to help with logistical planning of getting the kits around. To improve access for artists during the pandemic, VP moved all of its bookings to an online system that provides members with 24 hour access to sign into their account and book equipment.

Eusebio also created a series called *BIPOC Tech Talk* partially in response to the pandemic. During a BIPOC artist roundtable pre-pandemic, participants had expressed interest in a BIPOC centered space for conversations about technology. Emma shared that “Eusebio leads the program and part of his desire to host it was to continue to build community during the pandemic and to do so in a safe[r] space for BIPOC folks. Eusebio has been active in the community for a long time so it's a natural and comfortable place for him.”

In addition to its programs and services, VP is also evaluating its membership structure by interrogating assumptions that are widespread in artist-run centres, such as the idea that “organizations should pay more for equipment rentals”. VP recognized that not all organizations are in a financial position to pay more than the artist rates and that such access barriers need to be removed.

Rather than rushing to implement temporary COVID-19-specific measures, Video Pool opted to work toward long-lasting strategies to increase access to the centre’s services. The organization has implemented some supports -- such as helping artists to move gear, changing workshops to online formats so that artists can create work more freely and flexibly, developing new bylaws and policies through an anti-oppression lens, and creating safer spaces policies for both in-person and online activities -- but believes that there is much more to do.

## The Challenges: Time, maintaining operations while innovating, and longer-term funding

While VP is strategizing new processes to improve access and is working toward transformative organizational change, it has identified some key challenges: time, on-going operations, and funding.



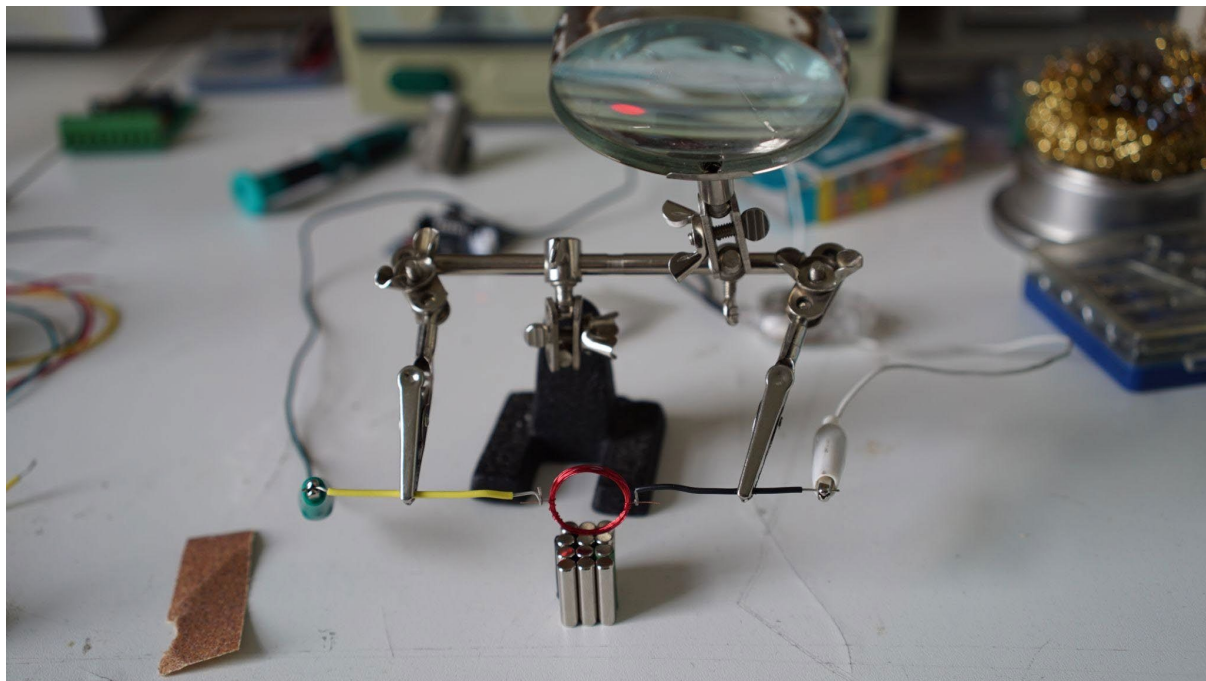
In order to be intentional about developing solutions to address access needs of its members, it was necessary for VP to take the time needed to engage in deep and empathetic listening to centre the leadership and voices of communities that are underrepresented or not typically invited to the table for strategy conversations. This consultative approach contributed to the success of the BIPOC Tech Talk group led by Eusebio. Rather than telling the group how it should look, VP encouraged the group to be led and developed by the participants. VP also committed to taking time needed to create safer spaces for participants to engage with the centre and its work.

Keeping up with day-to-day operations while making “huge structural changes” is another key challenge for VP. While disruptive of the centre’s regular activities, the pandemic gave the organization a chance to reflect and ask larger questions during a temporary reprieve from their



usual workload. As COVID-19 restrictions start to lift and the centre's activities are returning to normal, there is concern that there will be limited capacity for its transformative organizational work as operational obligations return.

VP is also anticipating longer-term funding challenges after pandemic-specific funding stops. It is common for arts funders to prioritize projects with “high impact” -- often interpreted simply as serving a large number of people, rather than serving a small number of people in a deep, focused, and meaningful way. This is the obstacle currently faced by one of VP's youth-focused mentorship programs, which provides career development opportunities to four artists in northern Manitoba. While VP's equity and community consultation work has identified this as the correct strategy to serve underrepresented and underserved communities, funding bodies have yet to fully grasp the importance of quality versus quantity as a crucial evaluation metric.



## **The Financials: Using COVID-19 support funding to plan for a more inclusive artist-run centre**

Video Pool received emergency COVID-19 funding from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Winnipeg Foundation, as well as support from the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy. For VP, this meant that the organization had the financial resources and the capacity (i.e., staff time) to pursue organizational process innovations. This funding along with a lighter operational load due to COVID-19 restrictions meant the organization had more opportunity to discuss, think, learn, listen, and innovate.

With the support of the centre's Board of Directors, VP decided to invest in long-term solutions for the organization rather than temporary pandemic-oriented solutions. Emma said that VP asked itself:

*If these supports are here, is there a way that we can take them and transfer them through to the community and/or improve our organization, so that when the pandemic is done we are a much more inclusive organization or at least on the right path towards that?*

## **The Takeaway: Smaller steps rather than grand gestures**

For VP, a key question is “What are the ways that we can be supportive of various communities, whether they’re in Winnipeg, in northern Manitoba, or anywhere else?” The act of slowing down to make intentional, thoughtful, and consulted decisions means that the organization can build for the future with everyone in mind.

Emma shared that VP learned the importance of starting with small changes, like changing door knobs to be more accessible for an artist-in-residence, rather than making grand gestures. Smaller changes can heighten impact and improve access for VP’s members and the communities that it serves. Keeping “community” at the forefront of its decision-making has helped the organization move forward without leaving important artist communities behind.

Finally, Emma reflected on the importance of partnerships:

*Partnerships are so, so important. We don’t do it alone, we do it with others. And that is really informative, and difficult because you have to be willing to be in a vulnerable space. You just spend the time and the effort to really think about how you take care of each other.*

VP has worked closely with the Arts AccessAbility Network of Manitoba on the DATA project (Diversity through Access to Technology and Arts), as well as accessibility audits which have helped the organization understand that it might need to start including elements such as quiet space during events for some attendees. This can help ensure “that anybody who comes in has the sense that whatever their needs might be, they’re welcome.” VP also partnered with Creative Manitoba and New Media Manitoba on the [Merging Mindsets](#) conference, which aimed to connect artists and industry members who work with technology. This conference was successfully executed but cut short due to the pandemic.

VP’s approach of nurturing and participating in a community of care has supported the important innovative work that the centre is undertaking, while moving at a pace that hasn’t left people behind.

## Woodland Cultural Centre: Preserving and promoting Indigenous history, art, language, and culture through popular virtual tours

Story Seeker: Melanie Fernandez

Person interviewed: Janis Monture, Executive Director

Interview dates: various dates

The Woodland Cultural Centre (WCC), a First Nations Educational and Cultural Centre, is a leader in the revitalization and celebration of Indigenous history, art, language, and culture, particularly those of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Ongwehon:weh. Established in 1972, the WCC is located on the grounds of the former Mohawk Institute Residential School near Brantford, Ontario. The School is sometimes referred to as the “Mush Hole” by those who attended, in reference to the gloopy grey porridge that they were often served at meal time.

The Centre’s primary activities include educational and artistic programming, museum/art gallery exhibits, as well as outreach presentations at community events, for organizations, and for schools. Through a Language Centre and a research library, the WCC provides a comprehensive and community-centred facility where youth, adults, and seniors can research, reaffirm, and celebrate Indigenous cultures, languages, histories, art and values. Its focus on intergenerational learning has attracted global visitors who seek to further understanding of the legacy of the residential school experience, placed in context within the resilience of Indigenous identities.

The Centre also presents a variety of traditional and contemporary Indigenous performances.

In 2013, major roof leaks caused significant damage to the building. With large looming repair costs, the Woodland Cultural Centre conducted community consultations to gauge community support for different options. The consultation results were overwhelming, with more than 98% of participants in support of the restoration of the Mohawk Institute. The WCC launched a “Save the Evidence” fundraising campaign in response.

With the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada report and recommendations released in 2015, the Centre has worked with settler communities to explicate the rich histories and civilizations of the Eastern Great Lakes region and the Haudenosaunee peoples. Possibly more importantly, the Centre has worked extensively to support community aspirations within its local communities, including the Six Nations of the Grand River, Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, and Wahta Mohawks.



## **The Innovation: Virtual tours allowing extended reach**

Prior to the pandemic, tours were only offered in person, on site while visiting the museum and cultural centre. As a result of the pandemic, all programs were adapted for a virtual environment, yet still offering opportunities for personal engagement. The resulting virtual tours provided an overview of the historic context, Q & A sessions, and resource packages designed to enhance visitors' engagement with the subject matter.

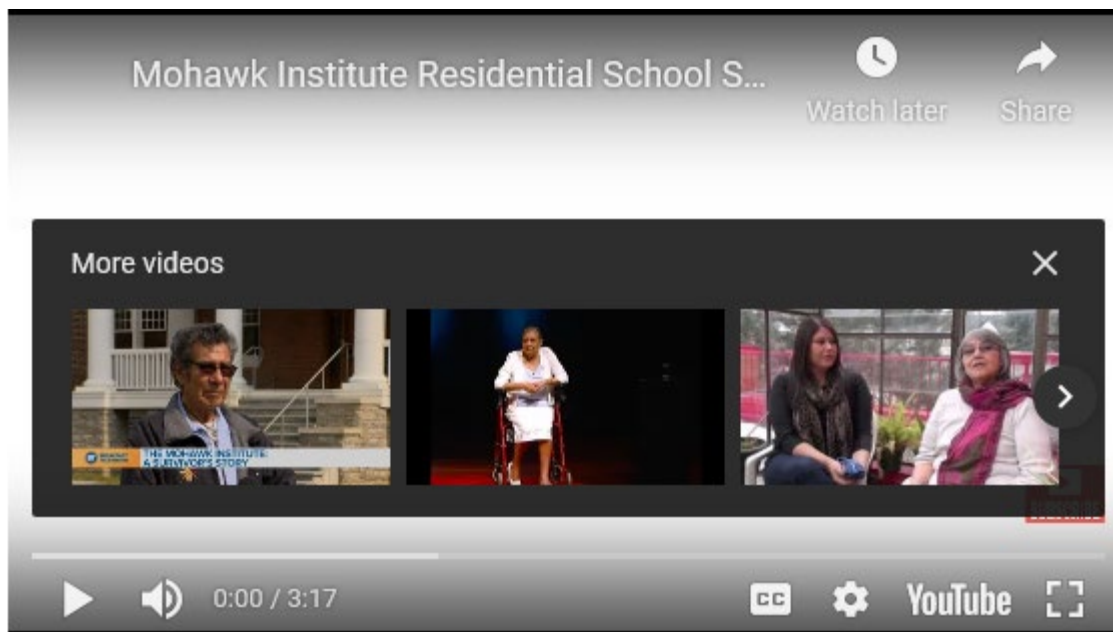
The WCC offered both a live tour through a Zoom session with live facilitators, or a pre-recording that can be accessed through a time-limited Vimeo link. Groups can also schedule a session with a survivor, but the availability of these sessions is very limited. Participant feedback is often featured in WCC's e-newsletter, which serve as a great engagement tool for deepening storytelling and participation.

The virtual tour video follows the guide, Lorrie Gallant, as she gives a tour of the former Mohawk Institute Indian Residential School and the institution's 140-year history. Viewers had the chance to see the girls' and boys' dormitories, the cafeteria, laundry room, and other parts of the building, and hear interviews from five survivors of the Mohawk Institute.

The tour can be accessed either through a Zoom session with live facilitators or a time-limited Vimeo link (with a pre-recorded intro and outro), should a group need to access the materials at their convenience.

Programs have been accessed by:

- corporations, for training and awareness purposes;
- schools, for curriculum needs;
- service organizations, clubs, and special interest groups, for awareness;
- non-profit organizations;
- government agencies; and
- individuals.



The virtual offerings can be customized to fit the objectives of the visitors. As an example, tours can be customized to meet specific school curriculum requirements, corporate training objectives, service and faith organizations who have specific priorities, etc. Resource packages, available upon booking, are tailored slightly differently for families, schools, and individuals.

As a result of the demand for Indigenous resources, content and training materials, the WCC is currently developing new virtual resources. The production of a new Mohawk Institute Residential School tour as well as new virtual tours, including a virtual tour of the museum and art gallery as well as tours with themes such as “land claims”, “contemporary art”, “living traditions”, and others are in development.

## The Challenge: Balancing history

It is important to the WCC mandate and vision that visitors understand the history of residential schools as a tragic part of the history of Indigenous Peoples but does not define the depth and resilience of their communities and culture. The WCC believes that it is critical to present a counterpoint to the history of the residential school system by ensuring visitors also visit the museum and art gallery to better understand the full scope of Haudenosaunee history.

The challenge exists to balance this important history with equally important history of vital cultural communities with rich histories and traditions. Achieving this is a tricky balancing act, particularly the recent focus on residential schools within the public domain following the terrible discoveries of unmarked grave sites across the country, as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada report.

The Centre faced many practical challenges in implementing this program. A key issue that the WCC had to consider at the start of the pandemic was how best to limit access to resources so as to keep them out of the public domain. The Centre has realized that they have to rely on trust that individuals would not copy the tour and its associated materials. The resources are only



available upon booking, however sessions are run on Zoom and university sessions are given access for a specific amount of time through a YouTube link. New materials are in great demand across the country.

At various points during the pandemic, the Centre found it difficult to manage the overwhelming number of requests for its virtual programs. In fact, the number of people who engaged with the Centre's offerings tripled, thereby raising awareness of Haudenosaunee culture and helping the Centre achieve its goal of balancing the history of their people.

## **The Financials: A substantial new revenue stream**

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person educational and public visits to the Woodland Cultural Centre became non-existent, which had a huge impact on revenue streams. The development and packaging of the Centre's virtual program more than tripled the educational program's generated revenues. Not only did the number of virtual visitors expand dramatically, many came from across the country, including schools. The Centre also reached many international visitors and has seen its offerings included in corporations' training and development initiatives. This has led to many more visitors hearing some of the important stories told by the WCC's programming.

The initial virtual tour, which has excellent production value, was created with a very limited budget (\$9,000) and with the support of a Six Nations production company (Thru the RedDoor), who has often provided in-kind support to the Centre. The virtual tour and Q & A sessions are extremely engaging and offer survivor testimonials. Groups can schedule a session with a survivor, but the availability of these sessions is very limited.

The virtual tour's fee varies depending on the visitors:

- Schools and non-profit groups: \$300, with additional attendees after 40 people at \$7.50 each.
- Corporate / for-profit sessions: minimum rate of \$400, with additional attendees after 40 people at \$10 each.
- Public sessions: offered twice monthly for a suggested \$10 donation. Visitors often donate more, with the average donation being \$15.
- The program is also available as a benefit to individual donors at certain levels, as well as to corporate sponsors.

After the success of the first virtual tours offerings, the WCC has secured additional support to develop additional virtual offerings through a number of funding sources:

- Canada Council Digital Strategy Fund
- Ontario Trillium Foundation, Resilient Communities Fund
- TD Bank
- CIBC
- McLean Foundation
- Inspirit Foundation
- Brantford Community Foundation

- Slaight Family Foundation
- Various tourism funding sources (local and provincial)

## **The Takeaways: Virtual offerings can raise awareness of Indigenous culture and help balance history, and cultural organizations are at the forefront of dialogue building**

The Woodland Cultural Centre innovation is timely as a result of the high profile of issues related to residential schools across Canada. It offers an important focus on Indigenous issues for individuals and schools at all levels.

Participant feedback is often featured in an e-newsletter that WCC has developed to support the restoration of the Mohawk Institute Residential School. This is a great engagement tool for deepening storytelling and participation.

This innovation demonstrates an important takeaway beyond timeliness. It shows how artists and cultural organizations can be at the forefront of engaging in dialogues about the compelling histories, stories, issues, and ideas that exist in every community. In this context, cultural organizations are often important places of exchange.

# Yukon Transportation Museum: A new spin

Story Seeker: Margaret Lam

Person interviewed: Janna Swales, Executive Director

Interview date: July 7, 2021

“A moving experience.” That’s the slogan of the Yukon Transportation Museum (YTM). You can’t help but smile when you read it. It’s the kind of humour that speaks to people who are interested in retired locomotives, airplanes, miniatures, and the like.

During the pandemic, when no one could pay those artifacts a visit in person, the board and staff at YTM engaged in an almost existential exploration of what it really means to be a museum of transportation. Through that process, the slogan took on a whole new meaning while preserving the fun in a pilot initiative called Yukon Spin.

With support from the Government of Yukon, the City of Whitehorse and local businesses such as Air North, Pelly Construction, and Lotteries Yukon, YTM explored what it means to digitally bring to life the history and stories of transportation in the Yukon - through the lens of a bicycle.

## The Innovation: Fulfilling the museum’s mandate through virtual tours of the territory

Yukon Spin is a video subscription service that offers viewers access to 45-minute videos of the breathtaking landscapes of cycling routes in the Yukon. Currently, there are two-part videos featuring the route from Silver Trail to Mayo and the South Klondike Highway to White Pass. There is no music in the videos so viewers can overlap them with their own soundtrack.

The idea for this pilot initiative emerged from an informal feasibility study conducted by Inga Petri at Strategic Moves. While a number of project ideas were generated in the process, the concept of creating cycling videos stood out because of how much it aligned with the museum’s mandate and how simple it was to execute.

Janna Swales, Executive Director of YTM, is an avid cyclist. As soon as the routes were cleared of snow and safe to ride on, she just needed a Go Pro camera and some company to capture the raw footage. True to the museum’s mandate to “conserve the history, cultural material and artifacts of Yukon’s transportation modes and to interpret this history in an educational manner”, the videos feature key historical and geographical facts, telling the stories of Yukoners as only the YTM can.



In selecting digital distribution channels, YTM had to evaluate a variety of potential digital platforms that would allow them to monetize the content. The museum considered business and technical requirements, as well as the values of the company with which it might work.

This resulted in YTM's adoption of the Public Place Network (PPN), a Calgary-based platform that enables clients to deliver and monetize video content. In addition to the technology service, there was a great value alignment with PPN as a social enterprise that offers streaming video solutions designed to redistribute economic benefits in a way that sustains content creators.

The real story of innovation, however, is in how Yukon Spin enabled YTM to reach new audiences as well as to create new partnerships and strengthen existing ones within the aviation, health, and fitness industries.

During a time when everyone was sheltering in place and unable to travel, the cycling videos bridged geographic distance and offered viewers from anywhere in the world a taste of the region. One viewer who used to live in the Yukon shared that they were using Yukon Spin as part of their physical recovery from an illness.

As a partner, Air North has been a long-time supporter of the museum mainly through advertising opportunities. They got involved in Yukon Spin by having staff join in on the rides and by promoting the videos to potential travelers. Habit Health and Wellness was a new partnership for YTM, one that developed out of the realization that transportation and movement have a strong connection with fitness. This has even led to fitness classes being held within the museum itself.

For the YTM board and staff, this pilot initiative contributed to a growing appreciation of digital means as a sustainable way to capture and preserve authentic stories of the region's past, while also enabling the museum to extend its reach beyond the in-person visitors that it had traditionally served. However, further cultivating the potential that the museum has identified will require dedicated support and resources that the organization does not currently have.

## **The Challenge: Resources to continue to grow the pilot project**

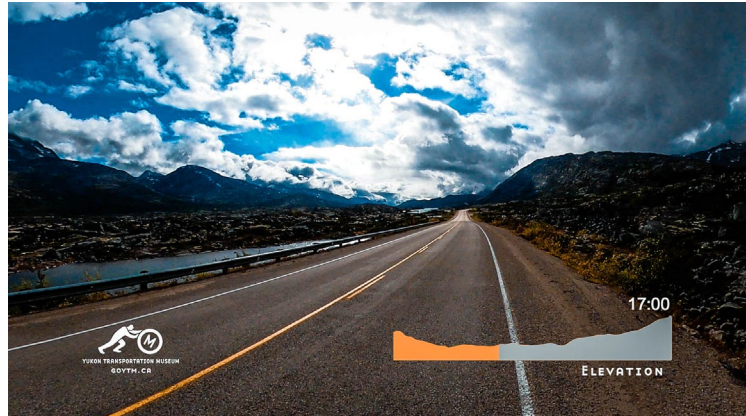
While Yukon Spin has been a tremendous success in terms of validating the concept's business viability and tech feasibility, YTM's current challenge is garnering the dedicated human and financial resources needed to sustain and grow the pilot in order to cultivate further opportunities.

Digital initiatives can require a separate team and infrastructure distinct from brick and mortar operations. Currently, Yukon Spin is managed by YTM's Executive Director, who does not have the capacity needed to regularly promote the service and grow interest in it. YTM's needs include a dedicated video producer to increase the number of videos offered (including an expansion of the content to offer museum tours in addition to cycling tours) and a dedicated marketing and communications person to cultivate new digital audiences (which will require different approaches than those used to engage in-person visitors).

Some creative thinking will be required to find new funding sources to support these new efforts. While numerous arts councils offer funding for digital initiatives, YTM does not qualify as an "arts"

organization for the councils' application processes. However, YTM is exploring economic development and tourism funding by situating its work within those contexts.

Another challenge is the reality of being a digitally-oriented initiative in the north. Internet connections are not consistent or reliable, which presents a significant challenge in generating digital audiences. Furthermore, the availability of local talent with the skills and experiences needed for such a project is limited. While YTM's preference is to form a local team for ease of collaboration, expanding its search to other parts of Canada will likely be necessary, leading to additional consideration of how to best stay connected as a geographically distributed team.



## **The Financials: Governments and businesses got behind the pilot program**

Financial support for this pilot came from the Government of Yukon, the City of Whitehorse, and local businesses such as Air North, Pelly Construction, and Lotteries Yukon. The funds went toward video production and distribution, as well as marketing and advertising.

While the financial resources needed to fund the project and develop it into a sustainable source of revenue may take a number of years, the existing pricing model has price points that would make that objective possible once Yukon Spin scales up their reach. Currently, interested viewers can rent individual videos for \$1.50 for seven-day access or get 30-day access to all videos for \$5. While the current user base is quite small, YTM is learning from user feedback to kick off a new advertising campaign for the pilot in the hopes of attracting new interest in the project.

A notable shift in YTM's business priorities is a reduced focus on venue rentals as a source of revenue for the museum. During the pandemic, all of the rentals were cancelled, which had a significant impact on the organization's bottom line. With the incremental successes of the digital pilot, YTM's board plans to reduce the number of rentals for larger events and reserve organizational capacity for digital initiatives.



## The Impact: Major shifts in organizational activities and reach

Embarking on the Yukon Spin project led to significant shifts in YTM's perception of its activities, reach, and impact on the community. In tandem with YTM's major digital shift, which has allowed it to offer a different kind of museum experience, the movement toward seeing exercise as a form of transportation has also opened up new strategic directions for the organization.

YTM's video content development has extended to other areas of the museum, including 360 degree video tours as well as other guided experiences, both within YTM's space and outside of it. YTM's new focus on digital offerings will proceed similarly to how Yukon Spin came about: through a feasibility study of what the museum now knows, combined with an understanding of the state of the world.

YTM's digital shift has led creative thinking about how to fulfill the museum's mandate, and it has also created opportunities for personal and professional growth among the board and staff. The organization has undergone a fundamental transformation in its recognition of digital as a way to ensure sustainability in the preservation of local histories and stories, as well as the importance of building a foundation to support the organization's longer-term digital shift.

## The Takeaway: Museums' digital initiatives can enlighten us on our past, present, and future

The most impressive feat that Yukon Spin represents is its potential for integrating the region's past, present, and future through a medium that is intentionally designed to reach audiences outside of the region. This story of resilience in Canada's North highlights the fact that innovation doesn't just happen in urban centers, as well as how much there is to learn from different regions of our country. Some key takeaways from Yukon Spin are:

1. **The delivery of digital services requires a separate and dedicated team and infrastructure.**

Many staff members of cultural organizations are under significant time pressures, and adding video creation and marketing to their tasks can be a disruptive force. A dedicated team can respond to the business and strategic needs that are unique to the development of digital programs and services, while ensuring that digital offerings are highly complementary to in-person ones.

2. **Explore new partnerships and novel strategic directions by piloting new ways of working.**

The work of arts and culture can extend beyond traditional spaces and contexts. The process of identifying opportunities for an organization to insert itself into new digital spaces while fulfilling its mandate can lead to new strategic directions. It is not easy to step outside of the familiar and think of new ways of doing cultural work, especially in a pandemic when all aspects of life require much rethinking. A culture of openness to small experiments and a commitment to learning from those experiences can allow organizations to become more resilient when faced with disruptions and uncertainty.