

B.C. Touring Council

The Ups And Downs Of Touring

Trends, Challenges, And Opportunities

Introduction

These notes emerged out of discussions at Pacific Contact in 2004. They have been added to, and amended, by various artists, agents, presenters, theatre managers, and funders - the key players in the broader touring system that serves diverse audiences across the Province.

Trends - Winds Of Change

1. New Theatres

Over the past decade, new theatres have been constructed in many communities across the Province, reflecting a growing awareness that the arts and culture need to become more central in the socio-economic lives of local communities. The trend appears to be continuing.

This creates new, and more, presenting opportunities for artists, arts companies, arts managers, and community presenters. There are more venues.

On the other hand, the development of theatres in close proximity, in nearby communities, also creates increased competition for audiences and funds.

Many of these new theatres are operated by professional staff through public institutions: municipalities, departments of parks, recreation, and culture, and schools. The challenge for artists, arts companies, agents, and community presenters is to learn to relate to different types of people and management styles, more complex union settings, and new expectations; and, to work with increased rental costs.

2. *Municipal Awareness And Changing Expectations*

Increasingly, municipalities and local economic development commissions are looking to arts and culture as one route to renewing local communities and their economies, particularly as the traditional economic and employment bases of natural resource extraction and government decline. People see arts and culture as being connected to the overall quality of life in local communities, and to increasing tourism. Arts and culture are seen as a way to both attract tourists, and to encourage them to stay longer and spend more.

Further, and particularly in some communities across the Province, people are moving to smaller communities to find a different lifestyle for themselves and their families. Early retirement is a strong demographic and economic force in some areas of the Province. Many of these people bring with them more urban or cosmopolitan expectations regarding arts and culture.

Finally, the increasing global connectiveness of all communities means that young people grow up with direct, even if virtual, experience of many different types of arts and culture. They, themselves, are often oriented to a fusion of interests and lifestyles. Their expectations are constantly in flux.

These winds of change clearly present opportunities to artists, arts companies, agents, community presenters, and theatre managers. On the other hand, there is a perception that the traditional structures and organizations which have promoted and supported touring and presenting do not have the capacities to catch up with this wave of interest in the arts and culture. In particular, community presenters, often small and volunteer based, may well struggle to make the required changes and to meet the new expectations and demands.

3. *Parks, Recreation, And Culture*

As many municipalities move to expanded support for the arts and culture, they lodge this responsibility within their parks, recreation, and culture departments. This may well mean, in some communities, that the municipal staff responsible for arts and culture come to this new role and responsibility out of a recreation background, with little experience of the arts and culture field.

The challenges, for artists, arts companies, agents, and community presenters are to discover the routes through municipal departments, and processes; learn to relate to professional staff with quite different backgrounds and interests; help them learn about the arts and cultural area; and find new ways of doing business that fit with the expectations of municipal public institutions.

Further, in those communities where the arts and culture have been promoted and supported largely by volunteers, there may also be barriers to overcome through the different styles and approaches of volunteers and professional staff; and, voluntary organizations and public institutions.

4. *Suburban Communities*

Within the suburban communities, diversity is now a fact of life. These communities are growing overall. The growth is often characterized by younger families, and individuals and families from different cultural backgrounds. Many of these individuals and families have less time and resources to participate in the arts and culture. One of the responses is a growing number of community festivals that provide, often free, access to diverse arts and culture experiences, particularly for young families.

The suburban community growth presents opportunities for artists, arts companies, agents, theatre managers, and community presenters to expand and diversify what they offer to the growing and changing audiences. The challenge, particularly for community presenters, is that the new people moving into their communities, represent different audiences with different interests, expectations, and tastes.

Arts and culture organizations in suburban communities also face competition with the urban core areas for audiences and funds. It is relatively easy for individuals and families to travel to events in the urban cores. The urban cores often have a much longer history, and a richer and more diversified arts and cultural community, to continue to attract audiences, and funds.

5. *Age Diversity And Numbers*

The population in most communities across the Province is aging. The larger numbers, reflecting the Boomer age group, will continue to dominate, and shape community expectations. This group also has the money and the time to participate in the arts and culture.

However, there is no doubt that the social values and lifestyle expectations of younger adults are both quite different from earlier generations, and more diverse. In the long

term, this will mean smaller audiences for different arts and cultural forms, and other types of creation and recreation interests.

6. *Cultural Diversity*

In many urban and suburban communities, cultural diversity is constantly present, and is a fact of life. The reality is that people from different cultural backgrounds may well have quite different interests and expectations of arts and culture. Artists, arts companies, agents, theater managers, and community presenters who come out of mainstream Canadian society can find it difficult to understand and respond to these multiple, different, and changing interests and expectations.

Within newer immigrant communities, associations and organizations form to bring in (often off shore) artists and arts companies who represent life and culture in countries and communities abroad.

In older immigrant communities, second, third, and fourth generations of New Canadians, new artists and arts companies are emerging constantly whose style is a fusion of their countries of origin, and traditional and changing Canadian styles. There is a considerable sense of excitement in the possibilities.

The challenge for artists, arts companies, agents, theatre managers, and community presenters is to learn much more about the changing impacts and demands of cultural diversity, and to build bridges with different types of cultural presenting associations and organizations, and artists and arts companies.

At the same time, there are challenges for the different types of cultural presenting organizations to learn to work with more mainstream arts and culture organizations, and for the emerging indigenous cultural artists and arts companies to create new and fused audiences, crossing over the cultural divides.

7. *Competition For Time And Money*

Increasingly, people's lives are become busier and busier. For many individuals and families, there are limited incomes to pursue arts and culture, and other learning and recreational interests.

At the same time, the numbers of choices and options that are available to individuals and families to learn, play, create, and recreate are increasing, including expanding arts forms and disciplines. The result is that the potential audiences for any particular arts and

cultural performance are narrowing, if not in size, in proportion to the broader community.

The challenge facing arts, arts companies, agents, community presenters, and theatre managers is that they are increasingly competing, both with each other, and with other types of interests (for example: the internet and sports), for people's attention, interest, time, and money. The same type of competition is also present as local arts organizations seek volunteers, donors, and sponsors.

8. *Economic Realities And Tough Choices*

The costs of creating and performing, running an arts company, presenting, and managing theatres are constantly rising. On the other side, revenues (for example: audience prices, government programs, and artists fees) are not; or, are not keeping pace. There is an economic squeeze all around. As a result, everyone in the touring system is having to make tougher choices.

Artists and arts companies, for example, are having to look seriously at how they spend their limited promotional and marketing funds, and the cost/benefits of having a publicist, a web site, promotional materials, and showcasing.

Community presenters and theatre managers are having to look more deeply at the range of artists and arts companies they present, the interests and buying behaviours of their local audiences, and the risks involved. They have few contingency reserves to take significant risks.

Community presenters also face difficulties in promoting locally unknown artists and arts companies, as they have limited marketing venues and funds themselves.

9. *Showcases, Internet, Festivals, And Other Marketing Venues*

More and more people are using the internet to search for information about artists and arts companies, theatre venues, community presenters, and funding programs. It is a powerful information and communication tool. On the other hand, for presenters, the internet does not and cannot replace seeing an artist or arts company performance live, on stage. This life action still, and will continue to, shape decision-making and choices.

Festivals are becoming an alternative for community presenters to see artists and arts companies live.

Possible Strategies

A number of strategies have emerged, or have been suggested, in response to the trends and winds of change, and the resulting opportunities and challenges.

1. *Capacity Development And Mutual Understanding*

The need for people in local communities from different cultures, types of organizations, and professional backgrounds to learn more about each other, create mutual understanding and trust, and build bridges that work is apparent. There is also a need for the different players in the touring system, artists, arts companies, agents, theatre managers, and community presenters to have a much deeper understanding of the economic realities and choices that the others are facing and making.

What is also apparent is the need for deepening the capacities and competencies of local community presenters and presenting organizations, and of professional staff who come into the arts and culture from different professional backgrounds.

The opportunities to expand touring appear to be there, but often, the lack of capacity appears to be getting in the way.

In the long term, there is also a strong need to develop among younger people interest in, and capacities for, local presenting and managing arts and cultural organizations.

2. *Charitable Status*

As the funding programs shift, and arts and cultural organizations need to look for more supports from individual and corporate donors, and foundations, some may need help in acquiring charitable status.

3. *Collaboration Between Schools And Communities*

This approach involves artists and arts companies working and performing, in a coordinated manner, in both schools and community settings. It is happening in some parts of the Province. It requires collaborative relationships among schools and community presenters.

The challenge, in many communities, is that this culture of collaboration does not exist. And, as schools and school districts have lost key staff such as district arts coordinators, it becomes more difficult for community presenters to discover who they should be relating to in the schools.

This approach can also involve schools using community theatres as more professional settings for students to see artistic and cultural performances, though this is often restricted by school budgets, attitudes, and policies, and the difficulties of busing students to local theatres.

4. *Regional Collaboration*

This approach involves local communities working with each other, and with artists, arts companies, and agents, to create regional tours that are more economically viable. It is happening in some areas of the Province, but can be difficult because of the diversity of interests across communities, and the perceived unrealistic expectations of artists, arts companies, and agents.

5. *Local Community Collaboration*

A strategy of coordinating the annual schedule of events and performances in local communities has been suggested, and tried but with limited success.

6. *Packaged Tours*

What works for some artists and arts companies is to offer a touring package, a combination of community and school performances, workshops, and residency possibilities.

7. *Showcasing*

While the numbers of presenters coming to showcases like Pacific Contact are remaining steady, and the applications for showcasing from artists and arts companies are increasing, there is also a sense that the current approach to creating showcasing opportunities needs to be reviewed.

Pacific Contact does not, for example, reach the culturally diverse presenters, semi-commercial presenters, niche presenters, and school presenters.