

*Ginny Ratsoy*

# INTRODUCTION

This issue of *The Small Cities Imprint* represents the culmination of over five years of research James Hoffman and I undertook in our role in Thompson Rivers University's Community-University Research Alliances Program, "Mapping Quality of Life & the Culture of Small Cities." Our mission – to examine, analyze, and evaluate the relationship of three professional theatre companies in the small British Columbia cities of Kamloops, Prince George, and Nanaimo to their audiences – has been accomplished with the able assistance of a coterie of undergraduate students and innumerable participants in interviews, surveys, roundtables, and the like. The small city professional theatre – audience relationship is examined, both historically and in the present, from multiple perspectives: first, from our own, as both theatre scholars and audience members; second, from the perspectives of a variety of theatre practitioners in the cities; and third, from the vantage points of both present and prospective audience members in the three cities. These approaches are complemented by extensive research into performance theory and best practices.

We explore the multi-faceted dimensions of Kamloops' Western Canada Theatre, Prince George's Theatre North West, and Nanaimo's TheatreOne to the end of providing both a written record of the mandates and achievements of the three companies and extensive analysis of their circumstances, as well as proposing various alternative models that would strengthen their relationships with their audiences.

**Section One, Critical Responses to Community-Engaged Plays**, presents James Hoffman's overview of three models of theatre-community relationships. His "ABC of Community Engagement" begins with a generalized overview of the work of the companies, and following the stated goal of many theatre directors to take their audiences "from A to B," posits "A" and "B" types of theatre, with A being conventional, canonical, and hierarchical in its operations and B allowing for more experimental, more flexible production operations, and a focus beyond entertainment. Most companies in the study fall somewhere in between, demonstrating aspects of both; neither, however, substantively addresses the paradigm of community engagement, he asserts. Hoffman proposes a "C" type of theatre production where aspects of an authentic community engagement take place. In brief, theatre artists work collaboratively with community partners in addressing the life of the community, in adapting to local settings, and in using a flexible, multi-media approach to staging methods. In further elaborating this type of theatre and in positioning the current and future work of the theatre companies, Hoffman has developed a set of indicators: a model of engagement. He then details this schema, examining the types of community and the central nodes of theatrical activity, followed by key indicators, each of which can assess a company's movement towards a particular type of community engagement. Finally, a continuum of community engagement is offered, to assist the theatre companies in discussing and assessing their present and future work, ranging from basic company sustainability/survival to regeneration of place. These are accompanied by specific indicators in three central areas: company goals and community; artistic roles and community; and participation and community. Along the way, as these are discussed, there are specific references to the work of the three companies of the study.

**Section Two, Practitioners' Reflections**, consists of a roundtable discussion that formed part of

the 2009 conference *Whose Show is it Anyway?* presented by TRU's Community-University Research Alliance and narratives and interviews collected over several years. This section affords a platform for a variety of theatre (and other arts) practitioners to articulate their messages about their relationships to their audiences. In keeping with the variety of voices expressing themselves in this section is the range of modes of expression.

In the roundtable, discussants—experienced professionals in theatre, music, and visual arts – share their insights on cultural production in small cities, and academics and practitioners provide wider contexts in the form of smaller centres, such as Campbell River, and larger cities, such as Montreal and Victoria. These might be said to be the spontaneous reflections, for, while the discussants were aware of the topic and likely questions, they could not predict how the discussion would unfold, nor how the audience, to whom the conversation is eventually opened up, would respond.

The somewhat more scripted voices that follow convey their messages in different ways. Playwright Ian Weir, who has had a long time association in various capacities with Western Canada Theatre, relates his experiences in an interview with Ginny Ratsoy that focuses on his small city experiences and perspectives on the company's history and place in the community. David Ross, who would serve as Western Canada Theatre's artistic director for over two decades, responds to James Hoffman's questions early in his tenure with the company. Mike Youd's reflections on his extensive experience as a small city arts reporter supplement his comments in the Roundtable: he clearly perceives the role of the small city critic as a distinct one. Ted Price, founding artistic director of Theatre North West, and Ann Laughlin, founding general manager of the company, provide a broad perspective on the evolution of the company to its current status as an integral part of the Prince George community that says as much about the community as it does the company. A strong sense of both the distinctive challenges and opportunities of creating theatre in small cities, as well as the commonalities, emerges from this variety of voices and modes of expression.

**Section Three, Audiences and Best Practices**, focuses on audiences—current and past, local, national, and international. It is based on extensive research on engaging new audiences, the current practices, nationwide, of primarily small-city theatres to widen their engagement with their community, and extensive surveying of non-attendees in our study.

The first two articles are reprinted from *It's Your Cue: The Audience Show* a catalogue published in conjunction with a photographic exhibition mounted at two Kamloops theatres in 2008 and 2010. For "It's Your Cue" eager participants—regular attendees—agreed to being literally put on the stage of Kamloops' Sagebrush Theatre, which served as not only a backdrop for photographing them, but also as a platform to convey their thoughts about Western Canada Theatre to their fellow thespians. The result was an exhibit of larger-than-life, salon-style photographs of the fourteen. In "What Audiences Get" Hoffman explores the various ways in which theatre is beneficial to communities (including social and economic) and individual, concluding that regular participants in cultural activities have higher than average scores as volunteers and charitable donors. Ratsoy's "Constructing Meaning: An Audience Interprets Western Canada Theatre" reports the results of a larger survey of WCT attendees held in conjunction with the art exhibit. She finds a high degree of appreciation for the social, entertainment, and cultural role of professional theatre and a considerable diversity of genre preferences.

Irene Buckle and Mary Lou Routley's narratives stem from their participation in "It's Your Cue." The two participants—long-time regular Western Canada Theatre audience members—reflect on their experiences in theatre and provide the reader with a sense of the meaning of professional theatre to its loyal audiences. Accompanying the narratives are photographs of regular attendees taken for "It's Your Cue" along with their comments.

Ratsoy's "Engaging New Audiences" utilizes surveys completed by rare or non attendees of professional theatre as a springboard to an overview of practices in Canada and beyond – and in theatre and other cultural organizations – designed to attract new audiences. She concludes that theatres in small cities can be instrumental forces in their own community, as well as serving as models for other communities, and offers a set of questions from which theatres can expand their audience base.

Section Three concludes with timelines that provide visual comparators of the three companies. Included are the stated historical mandates of each company, pie graphs outlining each company's sources of revenue, timelines indicating both attendance figures taken every five years from 1980 to 2010 and artistic directors, and documentation of each company's history of production of local and Canadian plays. These visual aids illustrate the historical growth and development of each company; the diversity of revenue sources, from ticket sales to bingos, on which contemporary theatre companies depend for their continuing existence; programming practice; and the relative size and influence of the three companies. These timelines and graphs illustrate important aspects of theatre company /audience relationships, both historical and current, and allow the reader to follow histories of specific aspects of a single company, as well as fostering quick perceptions of similarities and differences among the three companies. Brief summaries, complete with analysis, follow.

**Section Four, Conclusions**, draws on positive psychological research on individual and collective well being and surveys best practices nationwide (and beyond) to argue for an increasingly participant-centred model in small city theatres' relationships with their existing audience. Small city professional theatres in Canada may be working within structures that appear limiting at a time in which funding for arts organizations is increasingly precarious; however, incrementally deepening the engagement of their audiences is possible, advisable, and, Ratsoy argues, increasingly necessary in a society in which historical functions of citizenship are undergoing transformation.

Because our research draws extensively on performance theory as well as best practices in North American cities, we anticipate that the *Professional Theatres and Their Audiences* issue of *The Small Cities Imprint* will be of interest to a wide audience of theatre scholars and practitioners. We certainly hope it stimulates further study of the intricate and fascinating relationships of small city theatre and their audiences. Furthermore, and perhaps above all, we hope it will prove a valuable record and a catalyst for reflection and action for the professional theatres of Kamloops, Nanaimo, and Prince George. May Western Canada Theatre, TheatreOne, and Theatre North West continue to build on their successful relationships with their communities!