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THE ABC'S OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Some time ago, in Victoria, I was having lunch with a theatre director. He was new to the city and was being talked about as a young, exciting director – he'd had solid experience in Ontario and, more impressively, had arrived with a small coterie of similarly inspired actors and designers, all ready to kick start a “studio lab” company that promised to shake up Victoria's conservative theatre community. I asked him what he hoped to achieve in the next few years.

His answer was brief: “I want to take the audience from A to B.”

This reply didn't surprise me, nor did the familiar follow-up discussion couched in noble-sounding but vague generalities – about the need for artistic directors to have a plan, a vision that would commit them and their company to more than just doing plays, something that would bring about real, even radical, change. At the time his comment said plenty: this was in the 1970s and I knew that he, like many others doing theatre then, had read his Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski, two revolutionary theatre gurus who called for what seemed a radical rethinking of the theatre. I understood that, fuelled by these and the doings of the radical theatre groups of the 1970s, this director wanted to make his mark on society—or at least on the theatre itself.

I didn't question this statement very much at the time. After all, I was going to be his new stage manager and there was a lot of work to do, which included building a new theatre space in an empty downtown warehouse, and then rapidly putting together a season of plays. But I have often reflected on his comment, especially as I heard it repeated by others working in British Columbia theatre. It seemed that everyone working seriously knew what I began to call the directors' secret; knew that they must take their companies on a special mission and that everyone would be the better for it, practitioners and audiences alike. I understood this to mean starting with familiar stuff like the plays of Neil Simon, or maybe a Whitehall farce, then slipping in progressively challenging plays like those of Megan Terry or Tom Stoppard, and then, eventually, the likes of Samuel Beckett or, occasionally, a Canadian play. We would, in our own way, be as good as those innovative guys in Toronto, New York, or London.

As our company progressed toward the mythical “B”, we would learn lots about acting and staging – training was often part of the process – and the lucky audiences would somehow become better equipped to appreciate the narratives and nuances of modern theatre, maybe even to cope with the complexities of the real world. We knew that the theatre climate was changing and we were part of it; somehow, we would be good for the people of Victoria.

In retrospect, I know that we had a better sense of our mission as performers than of our goal for audiences. Of course we saw the community as vital to the enactment, but clearly it was a top-down relationship: we wanted them to follow us, since (a) we had the specialized skills and (b) we best understood the journey. We would save them from the stifling world of “A” theatre and we knew what that looked like:

- choosing hit plays from the British/American canon
- conventional staging methods: box set, fourth wall, proscenium stage
- theatre focussed primarily on entertainment
- a rigid hierarchical structure, with the director as sole authority
- unchallenging plot/character premises
- apolitical theatre

Challenging this was fairly straightforward. We knew we would select plays that were non-canonical; avoid, as much as possible, the box set and the proscenium stage; design and stage challenging plays, ones with social significance; and, yes, we would somehow be political. After all, it was a heady time, full of student protest, plenty of street and guerrilla theatre, and radical stagings everywhere: New York's Living Theatre was in exile in South America; Sam Shepard was big news in London; while *Hair* was playing noisily on Broadway. In Victoria, New York's provocative Performance Group visited the city, playing their work *Commune* at Open Space Theatre. The play took the Vietnam protest movement to the stage and enlisted audience members to take part in the drama, play different roles, parade and sing, and raucously join the movement. For us, this looked like the real thing: here was theatre *in extremis* that met all the criteria for B—and we knew what B theatre looked like:

- “edgy” plays: usually from Off-Off Broadway, occasionally Canadian
- a wider array of staging methods: less realism, more “bare stage” poetics
- plays with challenging themes, including political topics
- plays that got audiences more involved

Looking back, I know that we worked hard but had little impact: we certainly didn't change Victoria very much, theatrically or socially. What was missing? Were we doing “B” theatre the right way? Perhaps we were just doing an altered version of A? The fact was that the plays we were staging may not have been strictly canonical hits, but they were still chosen from popular, published plays that were created elsewhere, usually in big cities. We may have used a homemade thrust stage, simple, cut-down sets, and a more spirited, slightly democratic approach to rehearsals, but “edginess,” if it existed at all, did so mainly in the minds of the company, and certainly in a watered-down version. As for our audiences, those challenging plays, so meaningful elsewhere, seemed to have only indirect application for them. Had we compromised? What was missing?

In fact, we were facing the central issue that professional theatre companies in small cities in British Columbia are facing now: we wanted to engage our audiences more fully and meaningfully but were unsure how to do it. We knew that we were not doing “A” anymore, but were cloudy about framing a discussion around “B.” We were good at mapping out plans for ourselves, about rethinking the role of directors, designers, actors, but not for our audiences; somehow, they were just supposed to “get it.” Audiences, and by wider implication, the community at large, were to be challenged, talked at, worked on, and treated as needy but willing followers. Like many companies today, we didn't fully understand community engagement.

Why community engagement? Why should professional companies working in small cities be overly concerned about their audiences? As the only professional theatre artists in town, aren't they already well enough known in their community? Don't they already work closely with their community in myriad ways—from buying lumber for scenery and printing brochures for their shows, to getting local sponsors and appearing regularly in the newspapers? The truth is, while excellent work has been done, there is little known about the relationship between theatre and community; indeed, all the companies studied would love to know more about their audiences, interact better with them, and, by extension, with their entire communities. When Western Canada Theatre launched its 2003-2004 season of plays with a brochure titled, "See the World from the Edge of Your Seat," there seemed to be a commitment, however defined, to examine a living reality beyond fiction. Clearly there is a tendency toward deeper community engagement, however understood.

Comparison and sharing are great sources of knowledge, and certainly among the three companies there has been helpful activity. Each is a member of PACT, which has a mentoring program in which more established, successful companies mentor newer or struggling companies. In this case, Western Canada Theatre has mentored both Theatre North West and TheatreOne. We believe that all three companies, plus their communities, could benefit greatly from understanding themselves in comparison to other forms of professional theatre, especially in reference to measures of community engagement. After all, during the 1970s in Victoria, we had a strong sense of mission precisely because we knew what kind of theatre we didn't want to be, as well as the kind of theatre we aspired to become. We suspect that the companies in our study have little sense of either; that they will benefit from reflection upon their present situation in relation to past and future models of community engagement.

We know, for example, that newspaper articles are written, receptions are held, audiences are appealed to, and surveys are taken, all of which suggest degrees of community participation in the arts, but, for the most part, audiences are undifferentiated, treated as anonymous spectators meant to consume a product prepared in private, with little community input. Indeed, broadly speaking, professional arts organizations have been negatively critiqued by cultural writers such as Jon Hawkes for such things as being simply an industry manufacturing commodities, an economic development strategy, a band-aid to disguise social inequity, a badge of superiority, a decorative embellishment: in sum, a rigid institution turning people into passive witnesses, silent consumers of an aesthetic product. On the other hand, this same writer argues that the arts "remain the paramount symbolic language through which the shifting meanings are presented...no attempt to characterize the temper of a time can be meaningful without referring to the arts of that time" (23). In this way we see a dichotomy: the arts can have a deeply foundational or merely a decorative role in society. Another cultural writer discusses the "tremendous challenge" for each community in facing the future in which universalist, cultural homogenization, brought on by transnational cultural industries, vies with what he calls a "territorialized conception of culture" (Harvey 4). He explains that, given the ambiguous and uncertain tenor of today's world, "with multiple interpretations of events", it becomes vital to understand "culture" as much more than "ways of living," as some sociologists do; rather, there must be an inclusive understanding of culture as "[setting] the problem of the identity of individuals, of communities and of societies, as being about one's relationship to others" (5).

We assume a similar choice: a changed relationship with audiences can lead to better mutual understanding, where theatre artists might begin to address their work more to a specific collectivity, where people assembled at play productions are seen less as audience or spectators and more as community partners. Proponents of engagement believe this will result in a richer dramatic experience as community access to the production of plays is improved. When audiences are spoken to, rather than at, and are invited more openly to participate in the production, both actor and audience member gain by a closer, more connected relationship. Jan Cohen-Cruz speaks of the "spirit of exchange infused in the performance

itself, accounting for extra generosity on the actors' part and extra receptivity from the spectators...the all-too-rare relationship of equal exchange" (5). It must be remembered that, while audiences are enjoying the dramatic fiction, they are also experiencing the live activities of people in a room who can make them an active part of the activities, just as, conversely, they can also make them detached observers. If the contributions of the audience are genuinely factored into the theatrical equation, how might this change the performances and, eventually, the communities themselves?

CITIES DEMAND ENGAGEMENT

At the same time, the cities themselves are deeply reflecting on their roles. There is a growing discourse on "the local turn" in cities as they are seen, according to one major study, as "incubators of innovation," places that, because of their "critical mass, diversity, and rich interaction" (Bradford 1) will lead the way in developing holistic, integrated approaches to sustainable change and progress. Keys to this "turn" are collaboration, social learning, specific geographies, and institutional capacity to involve a wide range of community participation. The actualization of learning communities, says this study, where citizens mobilize collective wisdom of their resources, is pivotal. Theatre companies, as public forums for the exchange of ideas, are prime venues for this mobilization.

The cities themselves are increasingly interested in engagement, as, more and more, they develop community plans that include the arts. The Kamloops' Cultural Strategic Plan (2003) identifies itself as "a comprehensive strategy [that] lays out a blueprint for cultural development for Kamloops for the next decade" (5). The city, clearly in an advocacy role, aligns professional theatre with engagement, as in its juxtaposition of "particular support for professional arts organizations [and] a strong commitment to providing hands-on, community-based programming" (27). Nanaimo describes itself as transforming from a "resource-based to an information-based economy." A recent (2008) cultural strategy document, adopted by the city, begins by noting that the "City of Nanaimo recognizes that what were once 'amenities' are now 'necessities' and that culture and creativity are an essential part of sustainable municipal planning" (*Nanaimo* 2). The same document describes its own take on the elusive term, culture: "Culture is the artistic, intellectual and spiritual characteristics that reflect the heritage of our community" (23). In the same year of the study the city was awarded designation as a Cultural Capital of Canada. Culture is less mentioned in the City of Prince George Strategic Plan (2009), which sees the city moving toward "an integrated Community Sustainability Plan...to set the community's direction for the next 50 years," part of which calls for "a citizen engagement plan" (www.myPG.ca). The city is also looking forward to implementing plans for an arts centre that would include two theatres, an art gallery, and other spaces, to revitalize the downtown, promote cultural tourism, and provide a community gathering place, as well as support local artistic expression (www.pgrpacs.ca). Indeed, more and more, research is demonstrating the benefits of the arts in adding to the quality of community life. *MacLean's* magazine recently featured an article on "Smart Cities." According to the Canadian Council on Learning, what they call 'lifelong learning' is a crucial index to a city's well-being, one of the four "pillars" being "learning to be," defined as "engagement with the arts, sports, media" (Gulli 33).

Indeed, culture is increasingly seen as the "fourth pillar" in the health and sustainability of communities – the others being economic, social, and environmental pillars. Jon Hawkes, noting the disconnectedness and powerlessness that many people experience in today's society, where so many activities are determined by experts and political elites, believes it is essential for communities "to engage with the values that determine the nature of society of which they are a part" (16). As for the arts, he maintains that:

A society in which arts practice is not endemic risks its future. The support of professional artists is a laudable policy but far more important is offering all citizens and their offspring the opportunity to actively participate in arts practice – to make their own culture. (24)

International policy echoes this: at the time of the writing of this book (2010) UNESCO has declared The International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures. Believing that citizens have a right to a necessary place in the cultural life of their community, and that cultural participation is not only an enjoyable participatory activity but can also be a vehicle for social cohesion and international dialogue and reconciliation, the organization's goal is "making the rapprochement of cultures the hallmark of all policy-making at local, national, regional and international levels" (www.unesco.org). In this understanding, the artist is seen as playing a socially useful role, certainly different from mainstream art roles. Numerous studies are showing the benefits of the arts, especially in building social capital and improving quality of life. In his British study, *Use or Ornament: The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*, Francois Matarasso, looking at the effects on non-professionals working in the arts, lists a number of positive findings, among them personal growth, skill building, improved social contacts, social change, and community development strategy. In his summary, he states:

The study concludes that a marginal adjustment of priorities in cultural and social policy could deliver real socio-economic benefits to people and communities, and recommends a framework for developing the role of participatory arts initiatives in public policy. (V)

THEATRE "C" FOR COMMUNITY

What is community engagement for theatre companies? Simply put, it refers to the degree of local inclusion, across an array of values and activities, in the production of performances. Of course some of this exists now as every company, by listing its attendance records, its discussion in the media, as well as its local sponsors, its commissioning of plays, its staging of film festivals, wine-tastings, etc., can claim a healthy degree of community engagement. Fundamentally it means that theatre practitioners will, in small ways or large, situate at least part of the process of mounting a performance within the actualities of their community. Small ways: they might hire a local actor, director, or designer; they might have special performance events for certain demographics, such as putting on children's plays or plays addressing social problems; there might be special lobby displays, program notes, talkback sessions that link the play to the local situation. All of these are valuable and have been tried.

Larger ways: the company might commission a playwright to write a play about local characters or stories. Western Canada Theatre has scored notably here, with productions of *Flyin' Phil* (1992), *The Trials of Eddy Haymour* (1994), and *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* (2004). Indeed, over the company's thirty-three year history, Kamloops-born writer Ian Weir is their most-staged playwright. Nanaimo's TheatreOne recently commissioned G. Kim Blank to write a play about a local icon, former mayor and colourful character, Frank Ney, titled *Being Frank* (2007). The company also sponsors annual playwrighting workshops and staged readings, under the title "Emerging Voices," and performs in local parks and downtown locations.

Interestingly, the company that shows signs of the greatest success in terms of attracting wide audiences is Theatre North West in Prince George, which has never commissioned or staged a new play telling a local story. Despite this, the company enjoys an extraordinary level of attendance, with one of the highest per capita subscription rates (3874 season subscribers in 2009/10), often needing to add extra performances to the run of a play (three out of four of the plays staged in the 2008-09 season enjoyed

extended runs). Plays may not be locally written or referenced, but of the forty seven plays staged by the company from 1994 to 2006, sixty percent were written by Canadian playwrights, five of them from British Columbia.

But no matter how well-intentioned, each of these companies employs a set of practices that ultimately limits their community engagement. They do well, often with innovative and exciting projects, but they are structured in a variety of ways, some historical, some economic, that resist a more effective form of community engagement. We might ask: has the professional theatre in the small city changed very much from “B”? One way to assess this is to have a look at the full meaning of community engagement.

Community-engaged theatre may be the wrong term. Most theatre directors would readily agree their work is engaged in very important ways with their community. Indeed, we propose that much of the work done today is B; that is, things have certainly changed from the earlier model of A. There are now a number of Canadian, even local, plays performed; the box set is less and less seen; plays are chosen with strong themes, including those with political content. In 2008-09 while Nanaimo’s TheatreOne ambitiously mounted a season of four plays in the round, with audiences circling the stage on the city’s proscenium Port Theatre, Western Canada Theatre staged George Ryga’s perennial classic of First Nations clout, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, which then went on to play at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. What we need is a system of measure that will allow us to consider the three professional theatre companies within a range of possibilities: to describe their present situation as they exist on a continuum that locates their practices in the past and the future—in relation to community engagement. If we can outline their activity in different moments in practice, then we frame our discussion with reference to a meaningful context of community engagement. How can we widen this discussion to gain that perspective? We have talked about A and B theatre: we now need to consider a C theatre.

What is C theatre? We are calling this community-based theatre. The major point of departure from B is that theatre practitioners work with their community in all aspects of theatre-making. The origin, the constant reference in all phases of the work, is the life of the community. Sometimes called grassroots theatre, ensemble theatre, development theatre, or theatre of place, it emphasizes working closely with its particular location and inhabitants on a shared basis in the making of great theatre. It is understood by its practitioners as egalitarian, so different from the top-down model of the conventional professional theatre. In this model theatre professionals work openly, using their particular skills, alongside other community workers, in a wide range of projects to engage the hopes, concerns, and, ultimately, the identity of the community; both believe in the power, even the responsibility, of their artwork to bring people together in stimulating a sense of *communitas*; both are committed to producing great theatre meant for all groups in a diverse community, not just “the wealthiest 15% of the population...of mainstream theatre” (Leonard 14). Telling stories and depicting characters and issues meaningful to the community, the model of C theatre might look like this:

- equal partners: theatre artists work collaboratively with community members
- the life of the community: focus on telling the story of the community
- adaptable locale: physically situating the work centrally in the community
- multi-media: a flexible approach to dramaturgy, staging methods

Why focus on C theatre? In the end the argument comes down to how we answer the following question: what is the role of theatre in a community? Do we stage plays primarily for entertainment, or do we also embrace other reasons? Is the task of professional theatre primarily to dazzle us with spectacular

costumes and scenery, and perhaps a thought-provoking moment or two, before sending us home – to be forgotten in a day or two?

Not so, say a growing number of community workers in the arts who believe that community cultural development occurs when more and more people take an active role in their communities, that culture is a crucial means for social transformation, and that artists are agents of societal change. It is the place where theatrical performance, seen in this light, is the place (one writer calls it the “last public forum for common people” (Leonard 30) where ordinary people can fully speak their stories and be heard by others.

Also, the rhetoric is there: all three companies have an ongoing monologue regarding their role and impact in the community, whether it is seen as simply offering great artistic entertainment or additionally presenting something intellectually or emotionally vital for their audiences. In its original mandate statement, Theatre North West talks of “reaching a broad cross-section of the community through varied and stimulating programming that strives to inspire, invigorate, educate, and entertain by reflecting and illuminating the concerns and aspirations of both the community and the world today” (Price “Introducing”). But behind these gestures is uncertainty: when we inquire about which cultural goals or which segments of the community are being addressed, the picture gets murky. The companies seem to want us to believe they are deeply community-engaged, and there is evidence to support this, but how can we measure it? We are suggesting a language, a meta-analysis, in order to talk about their work as community engaged, something inclusive of and also beyond the usual issues of funding, marketing, personnel, or venue. Thus we come to specific indicators.

To conduct this study we use indicators—major tools of measurement—that allow us to focus our research questions and, in the end, draw a few conclusions. Indicators are units of information derived from data sources, interviews, surveys, public statements, and the like, that characterize specific aspects of the day-to-day operations of the companies in action. The goal is improved practice: as knowledge is gained, as performance levels are monitored, as perspectives are widened, the companies can better manage existing practice and tailor policy for the future. Since we wish to learn about both theatre companies and their communities, we will pay attention to intrinsic, artistic values of the companies themselves, as well as to instrumental impacts, such as their social impact. In order to bring all this together, we have chosen one central indicator, community engagement, asking two broad questions: what is the nature of the three theatre companies’ engagement with their communities and how can we understand it?

We propose a specific language to clarify (a) the major players in the equation, and (b) the particular vectors that link these players. It is our contention that if we can find this mapping system, as a textual and a graphic model, then we can more deeply begin to address both the issues and the potentials of the operation of professional theatre in the small city. If it works, we will have a mapping of each company’s position amplified with directional patterns relating to its major centres of movement.

AN ENGAGEMENT MODEL

Our purpose here is singular: we wish to present a method for describing the work of professional theatre companies in a small city. This is done in a general manner that is applicable to any theatre company, in any small city. While we will naturally provide reference to the three companies under study, detail some of their activities, and occasionally make statements about them, this is done mainly for illustration and example, not for criticism, since our intention is not to provide summary or conclusive descriptions that might lock these companies into a single, simplistic characterization. To do so would risk falling into judgmental or dismissive roles, both of which we are certainly hoping to avoid.

Working from the general to the particular, we begin with a schematic of the wide community, first dividing it into two specific communities; within it we locate three crucial nodes from which or toward which the professional theatre companies operate. Viewing the central activities of the companies within this community (seen as a circle) we locate six vectors that drive the companies in a movement relationship with each community. This condensed detail gives rise to the Community Engagement Model that provides five summary positions on a continuum ranging from basic sustainability to full-fledged community engagement. Finally, in order to facilitate the foregoing in a practical way, we provide a short list of working tools for examining the theatre companies, each centred around three topic areas.

In this model of engagement we first identify the wide community within which the companies function. In a general manner applicable to all three small cities, we identify the major segments of these communities, based on the dynamic interests of the theatre companies as both arts organizations and members of the community. That is, if their communities are defined by their specific and condensed movements toward certain communities, if the companies can be seen as moving towards or away from certain groups, what does this look like? What is their matrix? Whatever they do, the companies work in the community, engaging specific groups of citizens, whether in commercial, supportive, entertainment or other relationships. What are these major groups through which they must navigate? We see two sections, two general communities: on the left is what we are calling the Civic Community, and on the right, the Citizen Community.

The civic group represents the more formal, organized aspects of the city's hegemonic grouping, its governing and influential classes that typically provide the majority of audience support for a professional company. Here we find a well-documented community: they are formally educated, middle-class, middle-aged, and in a healthy income bracket. They have the interest and the wherewithal to support the arts; as audiences they tend to see performance as a leisure activity, an aesthetic product to be consumed, an occasion to confirm social status and capital. Professional theatre is largely programmed to appeal to this group, less so to the next.

The second area, the citizen group, pertains to the wider community in all its diversity, demographically including, along with some from the first group, the less formally educated, the young, lower income, ethnic, and aboriginal persons, who comprise the majority of the non-attending audiences. The small city theatre tends to engage these only indirectly: many in this group would see the play offerings as perhaps irrelevant, elitist, or simply too expensive. Our survey of non-regular or only occasional attendees in Kamloops reveals that, for most people, the reason for not participating is the lack of time and high cost of tickets, as well as the prevailing belief that the shows are just not designed for them. Of course the companies might occasionally commission a play with local interest that appeals to a non-traditional segment of the community, as occurred with *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*. Even so, the companies maintain the distancing inherent in professional operations such as the authoritative playwright, closed rehearsals, hierarchical artistic interpretations, formal venue, etc.

If we can imagine both groups sharing a large circle representing the total community, with a dividing line separating the two, then the circle depicts the matrix within which the small city professional theatre companies operate. As they do so, as they function from day to day, they move in several directions, toward certain general goals, their primary centres of functioning. The question then is: What are the

The Community

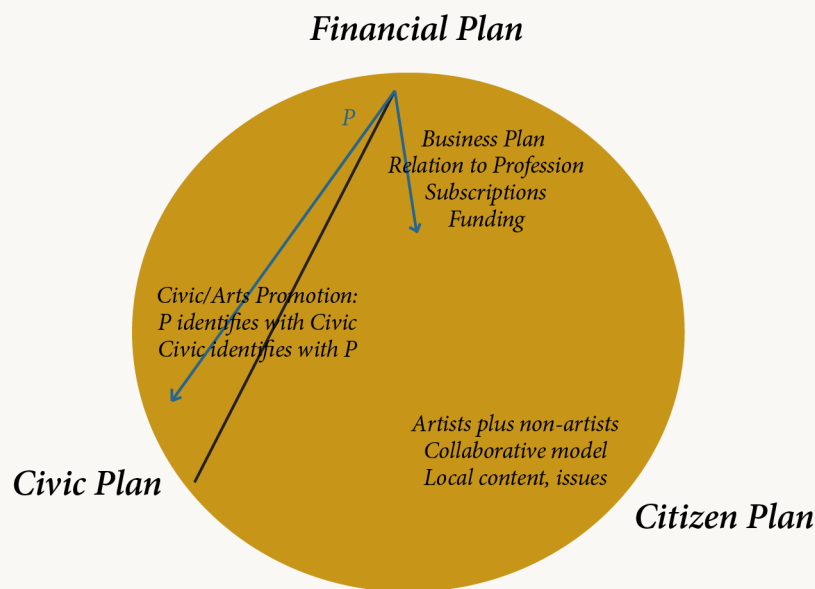
At first glance, we see two distinct communities...



major nexus points in the operations of the companies?

In the following model, we identify three nodes (identified on the diagram as Plans): the Basic, the Civic, and the Citizen nodes. It is our contention that at all times the companies spend their energies in a dynamic movement pattern between these three; that the nature of their evolving identity has much to do with their positioning between these nodes, notably with reference to their origins and destinations; that their degree of community engagement can be seen in relation to the nodes; and that all three nodes are community-engaged but in very different ways.

At the top, acknowledging where most professional companies begin and hope to remain in healthy solvency, is the Basic Node; this drives the company into familiar, bottom line territory, with the theatre seen variously as a business company, a professional producing organization, a cultural supplier, and a commercial player with vital economic and management connections to its community. Within this node are the vectors that drive the Basic Operations. The structuring of this, particularly with regard to the area of the business plan, funding arrangements, and relation to formal organizations such as Actors Equity Association,



will in many ways pre-determine the dynamics of movement towards the other two nodes. It is important to note that all professional companies, having established a basic operation, move downwards toward particular platforms of community engagement, with each aspect of the basic operation functioning in a push-pull relationship with the other two nodes. Tendencies in this node can be seen in the following:

Tendencies

- The business plan aligns the company with the Civic Community
- Business choices tend toward regularity, stability, similarity (e.g. subscription series)
- Marketing is geared to a generalized, middle-class community
- Production methods are protected within conventional artistic protocols

The other two nodes are the Civic and the Citizen. The Civic occurs when the theatre company aligns its direction toward those of the Civic community, whether catering to the audience demographic that traditionally favours professional theatre or participating in municipal agendas such as economic development plans. In its extreme form, the Civic involves the creation of a theatrical product for a select community, and the mutual construction of the theatre company with the public agenda of the small city. In this node both theatre and the municipality—the small city in its official governance and leadership roles—tend to identify and self-construct more and more in terms of the other. For example, the theatre company might increasingly take its identity as a city company, bringing it into line with local designations or indicators of such things as the name of the company, its employment of known local personnel, a civic “festival” mandate, a canon of status-building contemporary-international plays, or uniquely local civic events such as the sponsoring of a film festival. Two of the companies take stridently local, regional names; all three self-identify as the city’s “professional theatre.”

At the same time, the city itself takes a specific amount of its self-identity from city cultural groups, including its professional theatre, which is particularly available in the small city with only one professional theatre company. Indicators of this would be any activities that result in positive identity connections with the theatre company. Initially, of course, there is funding and venue commitment from the city to the theatre, but there can also be deeper civic connection to the degree that the city’s own identity begins to take on the persona of a “theatre town,” extremes of which can be found in small cities like Stratford, Ontario, population 30,000, famous for its Shakespeare Festival, where parks, statuary, street signs and the like reference the Bard. None of our three companies have yet reached this level, of course, but indicators can be found in small ways in city websites, mottos, and publicity brochures, but could also appear in street signage, banners, tourism promotions, etc. Here the focus is primarily on successful business operations, evidenced by strong quantitative measures: number of functioning theatres and shows, audience/tourist figures, development plans, investment and funding, etc.

Each of the three small cities, in their strategic plans, regards itself as a cultural centre – the City of Kamloops, for example, designates itself as “the commercial and cultural centre of the region” (City website), while Nanaimo, as indicated in the city’s official community plan (2008), expresses its wish to be known as “one of the most desirable, liveable small cities in North America.” A major means to achieve this is listed as follows: “cultural development is considered to be of great importance to the quality of community life” (*planNanaimo*). Prince George, characterizing itself as “BC’s Northern Capital,” also calls for an enhanced cultural life: one of the major goals of the “My Prince George” plan is to create an inclusive community, “for which the performing, visual, literary, and cultural arts will continue to be supported” (*myPG*).

The third node is Citizen. In this section of the model, as we approach the lower right corner, we find increasing adherence to the collaborative model of theatre functioning. This area represents a demographic where there are different needs and relationships within the lived reality of the small city, different from the civic area. Since these citizens have counter-hegemonic connections with place, a more critical view of the built environment, they are more focussed on local issues and stories, at least potentially seeing geography and performance as a way to redress economic and cultural imbalances. Prevailing attitudes to the present professional theatre would be one of seeing it as an entry into civic culture or as something elitist, irrelevant, or too expensive. When we look at which professional theatre companies succeed with this group, such as Headlines Theatre of Vancouver, we find a very different practice. At its extreme, there is full collaboration between practitioners and members of the community, at all stages of content selection and creation, rehearsals, and production, all reflecting the various community groups that comprise the wide community.

Within this schematic, we can look at several types of indicators that move the company from its

place of operational origins downward towards community engagement of some sort. Once established in the Basic Node, all companies move downward: the question is, as they do so, how far are they moving and are they moving in the direction of the Civic or Citizen node? How can we measure this?

We propose use six key indicators, each of which will assess the capability for downward as well as left or right movement; that is, the degree to which the indicator (A) takes the company toward community engagement overall, and (B) whether that engagement is civic or community based. The six are:

- Theatre Personnel
- Professional Linkages
- Funding
- Venue
- Artistic Content
- Rhetoric

Personnel is the first indicator and is probably the most important, given the increased potency of staffing in a small city. This is comprised of the totality of those people employed—including volunteers—in the nature of the ongoing functioning of the company. The potential of this indicator for movement can be measured by such things as sheer numbers, the number of resident employees, the ratio of artists to non-artists, access to decision-making, and number of community workers. We can assume, at the outset, that the greater the number of persons employed the greater the number of connections to community and therefore downward movement, although the nature of those employed, especially if they fit the standard theatre demographic, the horizontal movement tends leftward to Civic node. We can note, for example, that most professional theatre artists are trained in formal, traditional methods and typically have worked in big city theatre, with its hierarchical and closed approaches to performances, and that theatre company boards of directors are typically drawn from the business and professional classes. On the other hand, as we find in Prince George, a small number of hard working theatre personnel committed to building a company from the ground up, faced with a desperate situation – little money, no theatre building to perform in – survived by performing in community halls and forming an alliance with an existing group, Prince George Theatre Workshop, can make deep and productive connections to community. If persons from the Citizen group participate, if a number of theatre professionals also see themselves as community workers, or, indeed, if a number of actual community workers participate, movement will be in the right direction. The nature of the organization, the degree to which it is authoritarian or democratically run, whether it is designed to provide open or closed access to wide community involvement and input, will in large part determine the speed and direction of this latter movement.

Venue is the most immediately visible, material indicator of the company's position in the schema of engagement. In making its choices in locating, the company, whether intentionally or not, is already marking itself as situated in a particular relationship to community. Indicators here relate to the type of performance structure, its location in the city, and its usage.

It is worth noting that many theatre companies select the "Temple of Art" model which emphasizes high art status, comfort, order, and decorum; the familiar proscenium type of staging insists on separation

Theatre Personnel as Vectored

- **WORK FOCUS:** What is the focus of the theatre artist's job in relation to either community?
- **STAFFING:** What is the number of professional artists in relation to the number of community workers on staff?
- **ORGANIZATION:** Is there a hierarchical or a collaborative relationship in decision-making, setting goals? Is planning closed or open-ended?

of audience and performer, strict audience control, and maximum emphasis on the performers, while play productions are seen primarily as aesthetic and consumable products; all of which strongly indicates a movement downward and left, certainly evident in the Sagebrush and Port Theatres. Theatre North West's theatre, a converted warehouse in a shopping mall on the edge of town, has a different effect: except for the name of the company featured in large letters, the outside of the theatre looks very much like the rest of the its storefront neighbours, while the inside lobby is a warm and unpretentious space, all of which signals a down-to-earth working enterprise familiar to Prince George audiences. To the degree to which a company can alter these practices, by loosening its absolute control, even in small ways, there will be movement to the right. It is worth noting that some companies, in order to alter this configuration, have attempted an opposite type of staging. Nanaimo's TheatreOne offered a whole season of four plays entirely on the stage of the Port Theatre, where the audience sat in a circle around the performers. The city's new professional company, Pacific Coast Stage Company, describes itself as "in the round."

The next indicator, again a very visible one, is artistic content, normally seen as the choice of plays but also inclusive of public events such as film, wine tasting, and gourmet meal festivals, all of which have been used by the three companies. The primary indicator, of course, is the series of plays presented on stage that tell stories and depict characters which may or may not have a lot of connection to the small city community. In measuring this indicator, we can see that some plays, although not specifically located in the immediate city, can nonetheless have considerable impact because of themes or situations that resonate with local issues. This is a strategy particularly followed by the directors in Prince George. Nonetheless, the usual practice of selecting plays that have proven their worth elsewhere, while providing a degree of human resonance, tends to act as status symbols for Civic audiences—our city can stage anything the big city can—but at the same time is less relevant to the Citizen community.

The fourth and last visible indicator is the rhetoric, which refers to the aura of discourse issued from a company regarding the company's purpose, direction, goals, etc. This typically occurs overtly in several ways, from visionary statements issued and sometimes enshrined on company websites by artistic directors to seasonal themes and mottos to directors' notes in play programs. It can take the form of various personnel as they appear in public to engage community in so many ways, from the curtain speeches preceding shows (WCT employs a variety of persons, while at TNW the artistic director always appears, thus allowing a more coherent sense of singular personality—and presumably purpose). But the nature of the rhetoric, for example if it is too vague, only promising a good time, appears as mere marketing with little actual community relevance. It also occurs less overtly in the other five indicators, where, for example, a particular vector can support or take away from a company's deemed vision. If, for example, a director promotes a season of truly opening the eyes of the community to important perspectives but can't really deliver because of inadequate personnel or venue, then the vectors move merely upward.

Seeking funding is an invisible but essential activity for any theatre company, while the nature of the funding can drive the company in specific directions. If the funding is essentially from outside the community, then it will tend to draw the company upwards to the Basic Operations node, to such goals as fiscal accountability and stability; if the funding is from the community it will tend towards the downward movement, although, normally, as funding typically comes from civic groups with either municipal or commercial interests, the movement will be toward the left.

The professional indicator relates to the company's relationship with its formal associations and agreements, such as the Canadian Actors Equity Association (CAEA), the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT), and the Canadian Theatre Agreement (CTA). As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the necessary contractual arrangements between the theatre companies and their actual working conditions in the small city do not always work to promote community engagement; indeed, if anything, the agreements tend primarily to solidify basic operations, then, secondarily, to move the

company towards the left side of the triangle in its encouragement of the big city model of proven “hits” and the season subscription series.

Finally, we can examine the indicators in operation, in relation to each other, asking which ones are the major drivers in a company, which the least, which drive the strongest towards the desired community, and which are in conflict with each other? We must remember that vectors work both ways; they can pull in two directions at once. For example, what is the nature of the vector describing the season of plays. Does it point mainly one way or two? How does it relate to other vectors? Is the season of plays strongly driven by the company’s rhetoric? Or does the rhetoric, because it is uncertain, seem to allow for anything goes, in fact allowing the season to drive the rhetoric? Or perhaps there is simply a disconnection between the two and the vector is weakened. If we apply systems theory, we can talk about the nature of the feedback loops and their effectiveness in assessing the vector relationships.

A CONTINUUM OF MAJOR ENGAGEMENT INDICATORS

We are using a continuum to measure the positioning of the three companies. We make the assumptions that the companies are best understood on a line between two poles, two units of possibility, those of Limited and Complete Community Engagement. We assume this to be a dynamic continuum; that is, that each company is not static but in a constant shifting from positions along the scale, no matter how small or great. We assume, too, that all companies desire to move along the scale to the right, to greater community engagement.

We begin by proposing a five-point continuum:

Since there is really no such thing as zero engagement, the left side of the continuum represents the Partial Engagement model, wherein, at its most extreme, very little would be undertaken by a theatre company to engage or involve the community in any way beyond the conventional presentation of plays, plays with little apparent connection to the community other than entertainment. Plays would be chosen by the artistic director, rehearsed in private, and then presented to the public in a formal setting. There would be minimal connection to the community beyond the usual marketing and financial support activities.

Community Engagement Model



At the other extreme, the community is a co-partner with the theatre company in all aspects of staging a play. The producing company is comprised of both professional theatre artists and members of the community; all are trained and identify as community workers working together at all levels of production to create, select, and stage plays that are grounded in the ethos of the local community. Their work is ongoing, dynamic, and open to a variety of presentation modes and locates in a variety of local venues close to the community. It is a model of inclusivity.

THE FIVE POLES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

1. **SUSTAINING THE THEATRE COMPANY.** Here the focus is inward on the company itself and maintaining its survivability. In their early phases, and certainly in times of financial or personnel crisis, professional companies will tend to concentrate on interior composition and basic operations, on such elementary, quantitative measures such as budget, funding, personnel, venue, and, of course, the appropriate season of plays. Any engagement with the community will centre around increasing sheer audience numbers, and attracting theatre personnel to the city (identified as an issue in Prince George). Certainly the crisis in TheatreOne last year, when the company faced mounting debt and had to cancel the season of plays half way through the year, positioned the company in what amounted to a survival mode.
2. **INDIVIDUAL WELL BEING.** The company begins to engage its audiences in degrees of what Richard Schechner calls “transportations”, in which audience members are moved, inspired, touched, perhaps even taken to enjoy moments of intense *communitas*. Indeed, the aesthetic performance is comprised on these intense moments, for both actor and audience members. Despite Schechner’s comment that “No matter how strong the experience, sooner or later, most people return to their ordinary selves” (Intro to Perf Studies 63), there is the assumption among theatre personnel that there are significant gains in individual well being and personal development, that the play productions will even bring about personal transformation.
3. **CULTURAL VITALITY OF THE COMMUNITY.** The company engages its role, seeing the larger picture of itself as one of the important players in the cultural life of the community, as well as the economic and material benefits of such an engagement. Alliances will be made with other arts institutions and projects with the goal of both enriching and stabilizing the operations of the local arts. The “Creating Tomorrow” endowment plan of Kamloops arts organizations is an example.
4. **COMMUNITY BUILDING.** Here the company engages in activities that contribute in myriad ways to building social capital in the community. As the company acknowledges the diversity of the community, this would normally take the form of outreach programs to segments of the community normally excluded from participating in the performances. It could also include open planning and production methods.
5. **REGENERATION OF PLACE.** At this position, the company demonstrates full measures of community engagement, in all its activities leading to performances, with a focus on all aspects of the local setting. Preparations for performances will be openly inclusive and democratic, performances will be staged publicly in various places, with attention paid to the development of local heritage, aesthetics, and public performance.

SPECIFIC MEASURES: In examining the position of the three theatre companies, we will use the following set of indicators:

COMPANY GOALS AND COMMUNITY

General.....	Specific
Unchanging.....	Changing
Little effect on operation.....	Large effect on operation
Little reference to locale.....	Large reference to locale

ARTISTIC ROLES AND COMMUNITY

Artistic roles.....	Artistic/Citizen roles
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Not trained in community work.....	Trained in Community Work
Short period of commitment.....	Long period of commitment
Not open to mixed forms.....	Open to mixed forms
Not inclusive.....	Inclusive

PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY

Closed shop model.....	Collaborative model
Community participation only during show.....	Participation before, during, and after production
Hierarchical model.....	Democratic model
Little community partnering.....	Significant community partnering
Theatrical palaces.....	On-site, Parks, Neighbourhoods
Assert theatrical canon.....	Assert community stories

COMPANY GOALS AND COMMUNITY

This grouping refers to the stated goals of the company, in mandate statements, seasonal goals, artistic director's comments, and the like, that connect the direction of the company with that of the community. These can range from general to specific statements. The former, typically found in season brochure slogans, often appear to be pleasant-sounding but vague indicators, such as TheatreOne's "For the Love of It" (2005/06) or Western Canada Theatre's "See the World from the Edge of Your Seat" (2003/04). Noticeably these often seem to be variations of the "Let us entertain you" refrain that refers not so much to community realities as to the entertainment activities of the companies. Interestingly, Theatre North West has steadfastly avoided the use of such slogans, preferring a less mediated, more workman-like approach to the presentation of its seasonal offerings. Whatever the statement, however, whether highly general or very specific, important readings about the company's relationship with community are made; we note, overall, a discrepancy between the stridency of commitment to community in mandate statements and the vagueness of ongoing statements made in seasonal promotions. All three companies, for example, in their mandate statements promise not only to entertain but also to educate, although the manner in which the latter is to be accomplished is not specified; several even hint at engaging community, such as Theatre North West's mention of "reflecting and illuminating the concerns and aspirations of both our community and the world today." The problem, of course, is that these statements are often designed not so much for the community as for the granting agencies who supposedly respond positively to statements of local application.

Should company goals change? We venture to say yes, that, ideally, given the changing nature of community audiences over time, the companies would be expected to respond and adjust their goals, indeed their relationships with their communities. Thus a company with unchanging goals might be seen as detached from the realities of community, while a company with changing goals could be viewed as more closely in touch with the contemporary community. The company with the greatest changes is TheatreOne, which was incorporated as Shakespeare Plus in 1984, with a mandate "to bring professional theatre to the people of Nanaimo and the surrounding area with a focus on the works of William Shakespeare," and then, four years later, gave itself the unwieldy title, The Nanaimo Festival Theatre Society, whose purpose was "to promote the history and heritage of the West Coast." As TheatreOne, a name adopted in 1995 as the company moved from a summer festival to a winter operation, the company aims (among other goals) to "promote and encourage cultural development on Vancouver Island" (www.theatreone.org).

The question then arises as to the effect these statements have on the actual operations of the companies. Clearly this is a matter of interpretation: while the rhetoric of all three companies promises community engagement, how this is understood and what is actually done on the ground can vary widely.

Understanding the operational differences between the terms “democratization of culture” and “cultural democracy” may help. Indeed, while the rhetoric of the companies might seem to suggest the latter, with its promise of open access and active participation for the community, it is the former that is normally put into practice. In democratization of culture, the companies, much like many mainstream professional companies across Canada, assume a top-down approach wherein theatre professionals decide which programming is best for the community and then, using various outreach activities, attempt to increase the size of their audiences.

Reference to locale occurs when a theatre company acknowledges its local roots in its artistic expression. This can take many forms, most prominently in the choice of play productions featuring local narratives or plays written by local playwrights (Kamloops native Ian Weir is WCT’s most staged playwright); it can also be shown in the employment of local artistic and other personnel, tie-ins with local events (WCT staged *Roger Maris on Stage*, by Edward Nunes-Vaz, during a baseball tournament in Kamloops), and opening night receptions where the multifaceted work of the company is celebrated, but none of these is any guarantee of increased engagement, notably in TheateOne’s staging of *Being Frank*, about Nanaimo’s colourful mayor, Frank Ney, which drew mediocre audiences and attracted little commentary in the local media.

ARTISTIC ROLES AND COMMUNITY

The next cluster of indicators has to do with the nature of the artistic personnel when measured against a continuum from low to high community engagement. The first, artistic roles, is about the essential perspective of those with artistic leadership positions: do they see themselves as artists whose prime responsibility is the production of an aesthetic product or as artists who are also community workers? There exist many gradations in between: indeed, few artists working in the small city today would identify as working solely on aesthetic matters to the exclusion of the community milieu, and of course many, many decisions are made with the community in mind by personnel who claim to know their small city people well. On the other hand, how many personnel would identify as “community workers,” persons with a responsibility to work alongside community members or groups in the creation of locally generated artistic works? If we look at the list of artistic and other personnel of the theatre companies as they now function, looking for anyone with a “community worker” designation, there is no such listing.

Indeed, in the setup of professional theatre in the three small cities, there is no one identified as such. For example, in the long list of theatre staff in a recent (2008) Western Canada Theatre programme, thirty-one people are named. One third fall into a category that interacts directly with the public, under such titles as “guest services staff,” “volunteer coordinator,” or “communications director,” while the others are listed in activities concerned with finance, facilities, or production. While no person is designated as “community worker” or the like, there are eight listed as “Guest Services Staff,” thus somewhat defining the company’s somewhat hierarchical relationship with its community as one of host and guest. If there is such a role as “community worker” it would seem to fall to the artistic director. At the time of this writing, WCT is searching for a new artistic director. An ad appearing on the company’s website lists fifteen “responsibilities of the artistic director”: seven are focussed on artistic, aesthetic activities such as selecting plays, commissioning new works, selecting artistic personnel, etc., while the remaining nine are largely operational functions such as leading the theatre staff, preparing budgets, reporting to the board, etc. Only one of these, “representing WCT in and interacting with the community of Kamloops and region generally, and the theatre community of the region in particular” would seem to relate to community engagement, although in what manner is not specified. In short, while theatrical expertise is paramount, qualifications in community-based work are low or non-existent on the scale of requirements for the all-important position of artistic director.

The length of commitment period is especially an issue in the small city, as many theatre professionals, whether actors, designers, or playwrights, prefer to be based in large cities where there is more theatre work, as well as the opportunity to work in the allied fields of film and television. TheatreOne has suffered from a lack of ongoing artistic direction, with ten directors in twenty-five years, and Theatre West director Ted Price complains of the difficulty of attracting personnel to live in the city of Prince George. Each of the three small cities lacks the pool of professional personnel available in the large city; indeed, most of the performers and many of the artistic design and directorial staff are jobbed in from larger centres. Each company does employ ongoing, full-time staff, but most these are administrative: WCT lists eight full-time people, seven of whom are administrative, and TNW lists three full-time, while, at the time of this writing (2010), TO employed a general manager and marketing and production directors. While the particular nature of theatrical work of personnel is a key factor in assessing community engagement, the length of commitment to a community is also an important indicator as well.

The degree of receptivity of the artistic personnel to mixed forms speaks to their relationship with community. Conventionally, in all three companies, productions are rigidly text-based, representational, and take place on proscenium stages. These normative aspects provide a degree of stability for the companies, especially in planning a subscription season of plays and then, by enabling the achievement of well-practiced and familiar aesthetic theatrical productions, in meeting the expectations of traditional audiences. They also lock the companies into a built-in framework that works to maintain a certain distance between stage and audience. Since the artistic personnel have been, for most of the production activity up to opening night, the main participants, there is an automatic gulf between the experience of those who create the event and those who receive it, between the actions on the stage and what is happening in everyday life. Because the relationship of stage to the realities of the real world is limited, this can amount to a situation where “a psychic gap separates the performers from the public” (Graves 64). Performance theorist Richard Schechner has written that “Every focussed public performance is nested in one or more larger events or contexts” (209). For conventional theatre this usually involves, beside the actors’ warm-up and performance, the technical staff’s preparation of the theatre, cleaning of dressing rooms, opening of box office, arrangement of props, setting up lobby displays, etc.; for the audience, it may involve the context of a group outing, dinner and a show with special friends, a family celebration, a class project, etc. These give the play production wider meanings, whether technical, economic, or social; they also, as Schechner suggests, “give the focussed performance at least some of its meanings” (209). We might ask, however, are there any connections to larger events beyond this? How might this occur?

While this applies to aesthetic theatre, it is very different for ritual, political, or social performances, where the performance is always tied to larger events to which the performance directly alludes. At a political rally, for example, there is a strong relationship between attendees and presenters, and a strong feedback loop exists: what happens at the rally affects what happens in the larger political scene. This is rarely true for the professional theatre in the small cities, where, except for an occasional talkback session following a play deemed controversial, such as David Mamet’s *Oleanna*, discourse surrounding a production rarely goes beyond aesthetic considerations.

Most plays are representational: that is, they evoke the “fourth wall” illusion, a ploy that pretends the non-existence of the audience, positioning it as external witnesses to the action. It is surprising that this production choice persists so strongly in virtually all productions, especially as there exists the alternative method of presentational staging, where the audience is directly acknowledged, spoken to, treated as a confidante, even sometimes given an identity; surprising too that, thirty years ago, in a seminal Canadian staging of *The Farm Show*, director John Gray, famously noted how appropriately the presentational mode worked for his audiences, which, notably, consisted of the local farming community upon whom the play was based. A major reason for this type of performance is that all stages are proscenium: with their

maximum separation of audience and performer, their tendency to inspire the use of illusory scenography, and their utter control of all elements, they engender an aesthetic art product oriented towards an audience community seen as consumers, a situation one critic has reflected upon: “On bad days we tend to think of framing as the ultimate co-option of the innocent by a society that is determined to make a buck out of everything that it touches, turning every act into a packageable and saleable commodity” (Graves 69).

Clearly, one method of bringing about new perspectives lies in the alteration of these frames; in other words, in opening the performances to mixed forms. For example, the simple expedient of shifting the audience perspective from the distancing of the proscenium to the intimacy of the thrust or arena staging automatically brings the audience member closer to both the actor and other members: with the audience member now clearly gazing at both, there is increased bonding. In addition, there can be a change in the approach to the playscript, not only in terms of content, which can be more locally applicable both in content and in creation. For example, some companies are using an open source method of play creation and rehearsal.

PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY

Community engagement occurs at many levels, from a closed shop model to one of full collaboration in all areas of operation. Even in the closed shop model, in which all preparatory artistic functions involved with planning, design, and rehearsal are carried out behind closed doors, there is a degree of engagement in such outreach activities as pre-show press releases, personnel interviews, season brochures, posters, and the like. The three companies of our study adhere to this model, with few attempts to shift to a mode of operation that might deconstruct its inherent limitations for community engagement.

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