

Anne Laughlin and Ted Price

FROM INCEPTION TO NATIONAL REPUTATION: HISTORIES OF THEATRE NORTH WEST

Editor's Note: These narratives are authored by the General Manager and the Artistic Director, respectively, of Theatre North West.

ANNE LAUGHLIN

My experience in theatre has not included a variety of positions or places. I have worked in amateur theatre, but being the founding General Manager of Theatre North West is my only fully professional experience. I took on this position immediately upon graduating from the Arts Administration Program at Grant MacEwan College (where I was the recipient of the Joseph Shoctor Award for Highest Achievement.) Although a novice, I had the advantage of maturity (I was 45 at the time), 27 years of previous experience working in and managing dental practises, and an aptitude for being organized and practical. I also very much believed in the endeavour.

The challenges for TNW have come as much from founding a new regional theatre as managing a theatre in a small city.

How do you achieve initial “lift-off”? First and foremost was the challenge of financial resources. This was accomplished mainly by:

- A \$16,000 Canada Council Exploration Grant for 1994-1995 as “seed money”. (Apparently TNW was one of the last beneficiaries of this now defunct program.)
- Using my “retirement savings” from my previous career to finance:
 1. The first office equipment such as a photocopier, fax machine, telephone and answering machine, computer and furniture such as desks, filing cabinets and all the office supplies.
 2. The first production equipment such as lighting equipment and commando cloth.
 3. Using the Founding Artistic Director’s personal shop tools supplemented by those that I had.
- For the first five years of operations, I put forward \$15,000 in funds from my retirement savings for the Equity Bond so that TNW could cast each season.
- Office or storage expenses were eliminated for the first four years by operating the theatre office out of the three-bedroom townhouse where the founding Artistic Director and I first resided. This meant that rent and utilities were “donated”. Other than two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs, the entire residence became TNW’s base of operations. The first set pieces were built in the

basement, Board meetings were held in the dining room, and members of the public were seen in the living room office. Wardrobe and laundry facilities continued to be housed at this location until the 1999-2000 season, when a summer renovation project added those facilities, as well as a backstage washroom and a concession room, to TNW's venue.

- TNW minimized payroll. The founders received minimum wage for the first nine months of operations (thanks to the Canada Council Exploration Grant). After that time payroll was regularly stopped for months on end to divert these funds to the costs of providing subscription seasons. Although TNW undertook to pay two annual salaries of \$32,000, by 1998, with our consent to the Board, the founders' accumulated unpaid salary shortfall had reached \$139,507 (54% of which was unpaid GM's salary.) Since 1998, TNW has never again had to stop payroll.

Second came the challenge of human resources.

Other than hiring a Stage Manager, a Production Assistant by contract for each show, and a summer student carpenter, TNW's Artistic Director and General Manager did all the jobs for the first three seasons: Set Design, Lighting Design, Sound, Props, Set Carpentry, Painting, Set Dressing, Directing, Box Office Manager, Front of House, Publicity and Marketing, Program production and editing, Finances, Sponsorships, Donor development, . . . This meant working every day (and evening) except for ten-twelve days from the end of December to the beginning of January.

Gradually the theatre added contracted show staff, and then seasonal positions, but it was five years before TNW hired its first full-time permanent employee. TNW currently has four full-time permanent and two full-time seasonal employees. All other personnel are hired on individual short-term contracts. In TNW's current Succession Plan to replace the founders, Step One is to add one permanent full-time, one permanent part-time and one seasonal part-time position by January 2009. Although TNW now has the financial resources, recruitment of fully qualified personnel remains one of the organization's chief challenges.

TNW's location in Prince George presented a challenge. It was not easy to obtain a profile outside this region, and being able to regularly connect to the greater theatre community was difficult because there was no money or time to spend on travel. An annual visit from an official from Canada Council was always a very welcome event, as was TNW's annual audition tour to Vancouver, Edmonton, and Calgary. In 2000 TNW decided to hold auditions in Toronto. This was an extremely positive step. Since 2000 we have gone on to cast from across the nation, which has been pivotal in TNW's success in establishing a national reputation with the Canadian theatre community. Since 2000, even before becoming a member of PACT, TNW has made it a priority to attend the annual PACT conference. This, too, has been a positive step in building TNW's national profile.

As a newcomer and the co-founder of a brand new arts organization in a small city, I had a priority to "fit in" and become a part of the community. Time was always allocated to get to know the community, the region, and the individuals who made it their home. A phone call, a fax message, or a letter was not good enough – it paid dividends to meet the person or make a personal delivery to a business. Anonymity was avoided; face-to-face encounters were pursued.

There are many advantages of managing a professional theatre in Prince George. Those that live here are extremely generous and will embrace an organization if it is making a contribution. There is a hunger for and tremendous appreciation of TNW's work. There is still a great sense of community here and tremendous pride in and a sense of celebration of the accomplishments of any person or organization that excels. The city is small enough that personal relationships are easily forged. Friendliness pervades.

People are loyal to those that are committed and reliable.

TNW plays an important role in the city. The theatre fosters contact and cohesion in the community. Productions bring people together: one only has to witness the interaction among theatre-goers in the lobby before and during intermission and after a performance to understand the importance placed on the social aspect of going to the theatre in Prince George. Intermissions at TNW often take on the tone of a big house party. Artists so often comment on the positive reception they receive when they mention they have come to Prince George because of the theatre. Having a professional theatre is touted by the city in its promotion material and by businesses and organizations in their recruitment efforts.

These advantages have allowed TNW in just fourteen years to create its own fully equipped facility, attract over 3600 subscribers each season, build a very loyal and substantial donor and sponsorship base, obtain cultural funding from all three levels of government, have an endowment fund of over \$205,000, and gain a good reputation in the national theatre community.

TED PRICE

Ted Price came to the world of theatre as the result of a career change. Consequently, his experience has not involved a variety of positions and places. In fact, he can claim this only with his previous career as a school teacher, which came in the wake of receiving a degree in English Literature from Simon Fraser University. In terms of professional theatre, Price has held only one official position – founding Artistic Director of Theatre North West. All other professional experience has been garnered as a freelance actor and director. This freelance period was preceded by four years of formal theatre training consisting of graduation from Studio 58 and course work at the Banff Centre and Western Washington University.

In making the switch from education to performing arts, Price suddenly became aware of something glaringly obvious. Professional educators are everywhere. Professional performing artists are not. They are highly concentrated in less than a couple of dozen cities, almost all in the southern reaches of the country. There is a pressing need to decentralize the arts in Canada. Price, along with TNW's co-founder Anne Laughlin, became a convert to the simple notion that all Canadians deserve access to good art.

With this in mind, Price and Laughlin took inspiration from a number of theatres serving smaller centres. Chief among these was Western Canada Theatre in Kamloops, followed by Persephone Theatre, Magnus Theatre, and the remarkable Blyth Festival.

Creating theatre, let alone founding a permanent organization, in a small Northern city means both the opportunities and the challenges are more extreme.

First and foremost, we are isolated from colleagues and the Canadian theatre community. Prince George has no resident community of professional theatre practitioners. For any position that requires a trained practitioner, be it itinerant or permanent, we must be prepared to recruit from afar. In fact, recruitment and then retention are a regional challenge for virtually every sector in the North.

As one of Canada's newest regional theatres, TNW found achieving adequate funding a habitual challenge. 2008 was a watershed: with the three levels of government combined, TNW achieved a realistic level of arts funding. It has been a very steep hill to climb. The founders sometimes cite the blunt words

of officials from past seasons. During TNW's second season, a Canada Council Theatre Officer visited to meet and observe TNW's efforts. One of his first remarks was "I hope you realize you're twenty years too late." He went on to explain that no one founds or funds new regional theatres anymore. While we were lobbying for municipal funding for the arts, one city Councillor, who has since become a cheerleader and donor, responded tersely, "No one asked you to come here, you know."

During the organization's first four years the theatre was obliged to stretch a yearly project grant from Canada Council and the BC Arts Council into the operating funding for an entire season. The nub of it is that limited funding for *all* the arts makes the historical inequities of short changing the non-urban regions a very hard nut to crack.

It is common in small cities like Prince George for there to be only one or no professional organizations working in any given discipline. This often obliges the organization to attempt to serve a remarkably diverse constituency. Niche marketing or programming is not what's called for. There is the important challenge of producing material that will have the substance necessary to nourish the sophisticated arts attender yet remain appetizing to a disproportionate number of novices. (This challenge is not likely to diminish in the foreseeable future as the young city of Prince George is undergoing enormous diversification in its soci-economic demographics as it shifts from a resource to an education, medical, administrative and commercial centre.)

The other side of this coin is that by being the only professional theatre "game in town" it isn't a struggle to get the necessary level of attention – be it with the media or the public at large. And, the competition is not fierce for the live entertainment dollar. It is essential, however, to always work at a high standard! If you betray your claim to professionalism or bring even occasional disappointment, it will quickly become common knowledge through the entire community. A failure or even a disappointment, either with your performances or your method of operations, never comes with any anonymity in a small city.

Although Yukoners laugh at the notion, people in the Prince George region call themselves Northerners. There are a brace of time worn clichés about Northern communities and Northerners. Some of the best clichés are true. They are amongst Canada's most friendly, generous, and helpful. Where else within the first year of operation could a General Manager procure free actor accommodation by making cold calls to a list of people rumoured to have "lots of room"? In few communities can a new organization, lead by strangers, publish a wish list of needed equipment and have it – some used, some new – before it's time to start the next season. Or, heading towards the end of a first season, have a landlord who waives the rent for four months because there's no box office spring through summer? In the cities and towns of the North, it is not wishful thinking for upstart organizations to rely on the kindness of strangers. And once a relationship is established, the loyalty is exceptional. Northern values are extremely compatible with those commonly held by arts organizations.

As a regional theatre, TNW's resources have always been more limited than those of most of its peers. This means that the GM and AD have elected to keep the company's range of activities narrower than most. The organization focuses particularly intensely on its number one priority: providing productions of a national calibre to the regional community. This is a direct manifestation of the keystone of TNW's mission: "To provide for those in this Northern region access to the pleasures and benefits of professional theatre commonly enjoyed by Canadians in our country's traditional centres."

The founders believe an almost dogged pursuit of this priority has led to a number of sanguine outcomes, including, amongst both the local population and the national theatre community, a recognition or a reputation for:

- Unusually high production values, commonly regarded as among the highest for small theatres;
- A stable subscriber base that many have opined as likely the highest per capita in Canada: 3613 for a city of 78,000 with a catchment area of 100,000;
- The creation of its own medium-size, 232- seat, fully equipped theatre that is very popular with both artists and audiences;
- Policies that ensure Canadian scripts dominate, with regular mounting of unjustly neglected work and/or second productions for our playwrights. (e.g. Vanderhaeghe, Woolaver, Lill, O'Shea, Weir, Brennan, Roulston, French, Moher, Winter, Hunter, Pollock);
- Effective and inclusive auditioning and casting on a nationwide basis;
- Particular success in expanding well beyond conventional audience socio-economic demographics.

A number of standard activities or practices seen at most regional theatres are notably modest or even missing at TNW. Most conspicuous is the total lack of the development of new scripts. Several times the possibility of developing or commissioning new work has been investigated. On each occasion, once a realistic budget was drawn up and the dearth of human resources factored in, there has been a reluctant retreat from the idea.

There have been surprisingly few contracts to guest directors. On the other hand, TNW has long employed more actors in its seasons than theatres with similar or even bigger budgets. TNW also recruits them, along with lighting designers, from across the entire country. To cast bigger shows, which TNW produces at regular intervals, funds are shifted from director's fees and other line items to actor fees. And, of course, bringing seasoned actors from across Canada to a small city in the Northwest of the country results in considerable transportation costs.

The theatre's level of activity with children and youth is limited. Although there have been some short-term, stand-alone projects, there are no ongoing classes for youngsters. The theatre has found it a challenge to secure qualified instructors at affordable rates.

On the other hand, the school matinee program is extremely well regarded by participating schools. In conjunction, there are both School Visitation and Theatre Tours and Talks programs. The theatre also offers a "deep discount" Ticket Program for post-secondary students (four flex tickets for \$20.00).

Within the region, TNW has made some exceptional contributions in the development of professionals in the area of "cross-over" opportunities, from different artistic disciplines and the trades. For example, three journeymen and a wood technologist became exceptional scenic carpenters; an art gallery administrator (MFA) became an outstanding stage manager; a visual artist (an Ontario College of Art grad) became a first-rate set designer and scenic painter, and another visual artist became a props builder and technician. These individuals are talented and could not have found such serious professional development anywhere else in a city this size. They can now use these skills far beyond the sphere of TNW. The organization has also done unusually well in providing development for new and emerging theatre practitioners. This has sometimes been by design, sometimes by necessity due to failure to recruit more senior practitioners to the North in disciplines other than performance. The quantity and quality of opportunities for rookies to do significant work with significant responsibilities alongside seasoned professionals has long been exceptional. Although there have been some entry-level candidates who have floundered badly, success is far more common. There have been several instances of stellar results.

TNW has just completed the first year of a three-year plan with the objective of taking the organization to a historical high point in terms of financial strength and attendance. With a budget for the past season at an all-time high of just over \$900,000, a restricted Northern fund at \$50,000, a restricted

Capital Fund at \$56,000, and a two- year- old endowment now in excess of \$205,000, the first goal is already in hand. Programming and marketing strategies for the 2008/09 season have been designed to achieve the second goal. (The organization anxiously waits to see if the growing economic chaos in the once mighty forestry sector will hinder its efforts.)

These two objectives have come to the forefront because TNW has set out a plan for a staged succession process. Achieving these objectives should put the staged succession at the best possible advantage. Over the course of the next three seasons, there will first be a period of joint leadership between the founding General Manager and her successor, and then between the founding Artistic Director and his successor. TNW will then—some eighteen years after its founding—be completely in the hands of its second generation of leadership.