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## WHAT DOES THE AUDIENCE GET? VALUING THE ARTS IN KAMLOOPS—AND BEYOND

It was a phone call late one snowy winter morning that made me think a lot about Kamloops and culture. The caller was someone I had never met, a medical doctor from across the country who had never seen the city, knew little about it, and was considering taking a job here. He called me—at the time I was chair of Thompson Rivers University’s Visual and Performing Arts Department—because he wanted to know about the city’s quality of life, especially its culture. Was there a symphony? Was it very good? Was there any professional theatre? Did the city have a decent art gallery? Did the schools actively support the arts for his children? In short, what was the level of *cultural vitality* in Kamloops?

I remember feeling very keen, even amazing myself, as I started rattling off a list of rave reports on the recent *spectacular* activities of key players in each of the above named arts. The Kamloops Art Gallery was showing *Cities of Canada, The Seagram Collection*, forty amazing artworks commissioned by Samuel Bronfman to show off the country’s emerging urban growth in the 1950s, by such well-known artists as A.Y. Jackson and Goodridge Roberts, on tour from the McCord Museum in Montreal. The Kamloops Symphony, celebrating its thirtieth anniversary, had just featured no less than Ben Heppner, “the world’s leading Wagnerian tenor,” in recital, singing songs and operatic arias at the Sagebrush Theatre, while, also at the same venue, Western Canada Theatre, the city’s professional theatre company, was in the midst of a robust staging of *Molly’s Veil*, the revelatory play about Charlotte Whitton, Ottawa’s flamboyant feminist mayor in the 1950s and 60s. As for the Kamloops’ public schools, they had just established the successful Beattie School of the Arts for elementary kids and the School District was planning to open a similar campus for secondary students.

I don’t know whether he took the job or not, but I do remember how much this out-of-town person was impressed: my feeling was that if Kamloops’ quality of life as expressed in its arts culture was the deciding factor then we got ourselves another good doctor. And I hadn’t even begun to enumerate the many non-professional singing and theatre groups, the art galleries, the city museum, the festivals, all very active and lively! One thing is certain: this “small city” that we are studying in our research definitely has an established, even burgeoning, arts scene; we might even ascertain that Kamloops has a respectable degree of something called “cultural vitality,” which one study defines as “evidence of creating, disseminating, validating, and supporting arts and culture as a dimension of everyday life in communities” (Jackson 4). Western Canada Theatre, for example, annually entertains audiences numbering well over 20,000—David Ross, the managing director, reporting that he can attract close to 10% of Kamloops’s population to his shows, a feat unthinkable in Vancouver.

### *ARE THE ARTS GOOD FOR US?*

But what value does the theatre company—or any arts activity, for that matter—have beyond entertainment? Are there ways in which local arts practices are actually *good* for Kamloops? A remarkable number of critics and various studies are saying yes! Perhaps cultural writer Max Wyman says it best in

his book, *The Defiant Imagination, Why Culture Matters*, when he states: “Cultural activity is integral to a sense of community, as a primal form of communication and a shared act of the imagination” (15). Like a number of critics he is suggesting that, while cultural events at their most basic level bring sheer joy and aesthetic pleasure into our lives—in short, they entertain and distract us—they also, he adds, produce “tangible expression of the culture in which it exists, a living affirmation of the shared hopes and visions of a group of people who have chosen to live together” (14). I would point out how arts events gather us together in ways that *always* have an aspect of celebrating community. When we go see a play, for example, don’t we tend to dress up a little, invite special friends along, maybe go for dinner first, chat with acquaintances at intermission, take home a program to reflect on what we witnessed, then read reviews in the newspapers? We might even, on occasion, reflect deeply upon either the topic of the play, the incredible performance of a particular actor, the wonder of the staging design, or simply the unique, ineffable experience of participating in *the whole event* as somehow an essential part of communal life as lived in Kamloops.

### WAYS WE VALUE THE ARTS

Probably most people would say the arts are valuable; each person, however, values the arts in different ways, from one or more perspectives. Primarily, we attach importance to the sheer *existence value* of a strong arts scene, measured grossly in such things as the number of arts organizations, dedicated arts facilities, support organizations, civic and corporate funding opportunities for the arts, even civic policy backing. In Kamloops we highly value our “big three”, the Western Canada Theatre, the Kamloops Art Gallery, and the Kamloops Symphony. They are an integral part of city life, even listed as “popular links” on the Kamloops Municipal website, and we are glad to support them in ways such as contributing to their joint fundraising endowment campaign, *Creating Tomorrow*. Then, we like the *educational value* of the arts, somehow assured that at some level our varied contacts with the arts make us grow in heart and mind. We learn, too, that some people who perhaps rarely partake of the arts will nonetheless cite the so-called *option value* of culture, in which they place a high value on their option to use culture at some time in the future. I may not, for example, very often attend the Vancouver Opera, but I did several years ago and am pleased to know it is there and that I may attend again some day in the future. For some people, there is *bequest value*, in which they place a significant value on the anticipated delight the next generations will enjoy, the belief that it is vitally important to transmit key cultural values onward to our offspring—via the arts. Finally, there is *prestige value*, where culture becomes a crucial measure of a town’s reputation—its vitality (See Brooks 12-13 for discussion of these values).



In this way the lively arts provide much more than mere momentary entertainment or escapism—

so much so that we are willing to grant a higher status to arts activities than to many other activities, and we are happy to contribute volunteer or financial assistance to what in effect is the opposite of escapism: we view the arts as a kind of personal and public cause, a step into greater participation into the life of the city, a necessary nourishing of our local spirit. How does this work? How is it that we particularly value arts activities differently from other worthwhile activities? Critic Allan Gregg gives an answer by asking the question: why should we support the artist, even to the point of subsidizing his or her work, rather than, say, the equally good work turned out by a plumber? His answer:

The reason to support the painter and not the plumber therefore, is not for the painting that is produced, but for the effect that the painting has on the community. The effect, in turn, is to stimulate debate, create a common bond, inspire citizenship, and bring members of the community in closer proximity to one another—something a toilet can rarely do, but great art almost always does. In short, the ‘value’ of culture should not be measured as the end product of art but as the means by which art is exposed to and invigorates community life. (78)

### *THE CREATIVE ECONOMY*

These “invigorating” benefits to the community are many. American urban theorist Richard Florida has written about the importance of what he has famously called the creative class and its role in urban regeneration – in which he stresses the positive relationship between economic enterprise and the presence of a strong creative class of people such as artists, musicians, and other so-called “bohemians.” Elizabeth Currid, in her recent book, *The Warhol Economy*, similarly talks about the “social life of creativity,” of how vital it is, especially in a culturally leading-edge city such as New York, that people from widely different areas of creativity can get together in informal settings, whether gallery openings, nightclubs, lounges, cafes, theatre lobbies, places where the “cultural economy works most efficiently” (4). Here they make invaluable contacts with the so-called gatekeepers and tastemakers of culture, the people who lead the way in establishing taste: “they tell us what is worth having, what has taste, in a seemingly arbitrary, symbolic, and status-driven economy” (5). Thus, as Currid notes, the greater and more vibrant a city’s urban arts and culture scene, the more creative and productive becomes its economy:

What all the creative producers that I interviewed emphasized was being in the same geographic space as those who are instrumental to your career and valorize your product and also other creative types with whom one can collaborate, share ideas, and attain new projects...it is the social world that propels the creative economy. (112)

Dick Stanley equates social cohesion, “the willingness of people to cooperate with each other in common enterprises to achieve collective goals” (6), with the popular term, “social capital,” the advantages, such as increased beneficial contacts and fellowship made across society, that we gain from increased social networking. Specifically, he mentions how, as we attend an arts event, “the cultural activity gives us an entertaining excuse to be there and something to talk about that many social occasions do not. Cultural participation in all forms therefore tends to promote group interaction and cooperation” (7).

More and more, cities like Kamloops are realizing the civic benefits of the arts. A special edition of *Creative City News* (2004), published in Vancouver, names seven ways culture can help build communities, with urban revitalization first on the list. The editors cite a recent study conducted by Ryerson University,

which demonstrated how “arts and cultural facilities bring economic development and revitalization to neighbourhoods” (2), and for evidence of this we need look no further than our own province, notably Granville Island in Vancouver, Leigh Square Community Arts Village in Port Coquitlam, or the cultural district in Kelowna (the city was named a Cultural Capital of Canada in 2003 by the federal department of Canadian Heritage). In Kamloops there is ongoing discussion of where to locate a cultural district. Immediate, tangible benefits are the ability of an arts culture to revitalize old buildings, attract people to a city’s downtown core, and bring life to a downtown that “doesn’t shut down at the end of the work day” (2). Add to this the statistic that the arts and culture sector is the fastest-growing employer in the Canadian economy (Wyman 28), and you have a powerful economic engine.

### “LIFESTYLE - ABOVE ALL”

The above title could be regarded as Kamloops’ current slogan: it appears at the top of the city’s website. We hear a lot now about cultural tourism—which occurs when people travel to participate in a cultural activity, such as the Merritt Mountain Music Festival or Salmon Arm’s Roots and Blues Festival. This is especially relevant to Kamloops with its tourism economy that emphasizes the experiential and outdoor, what some call adventure tourism, a strong option in the area’s lifestyle. Of course, cultural tourism can be (and is) also centred on arts festivals, shows, museums, galleries, and heritage attractions. Closely allied is culture’s role in building community identity and adding to that elusive and trendy term, its *quality of life*. Certainly ideas of “development” are changing: we now hear a lot about creative communities or regions, places that are people-centred, organic, sustainable, and certainly community-minded. We learn in the literature that it is these communities, as they increase their various standard of living scales (Kamloops has its *Citizen Satisfaction Survey*), that they enjoy higher rates of business entrepreneurship and commitment to a more holistic view of the community.

Finally, the arts can be a key to a city’s unique—and evolving—identity. We know, for example, that cities such as Kamloops attempt in various ways to self-represent their community. Remember how, for a while, the city was represented by a little green trout wearing a gun? Well, Kami’s gone, and we now look for other means of imagining ourselves. The present rebranding of Kamloops, formally announced in June, features white line athletic figures of various sports against vivid blocks of blue, green, yellow and orange. Besides marketing the city as “Canada’s Tournament Capital,” the images, according to Richard Fisher, of Trapeze Communications, the company employed by the city to develop the campaign, are also intended “to boost civic pride” (*Kamloops Daily News*, 21 June 2008).

But true community identity comes from the ground up: it begins with people finding ways to explore their group’s common cultural identity, often through an array of arts activities. Your attending a



stage production by Western Canada Theatre, for example, automatically involves you in deeper awareness of community, simply because one of the functions of performance, any performance, is “to make or foster community,” according to theatre scholar Richard Schechner (46). Wide, inclusive participation in the arts, something especially encouraged in some areas of Europe, fosters pride in and a sense of belonging to one’s local community—which leads us, as one study says, to “develop local identity and belonging” (Matarasso, *Use* vii). One of the concluding sections of this study is titled, “Local Image and Identity”; in it, the writer cites several clear local benefits (among others) for participants that many of us may not think of, such as improved perceptions of marginalized peoples as well as of public bodies, plus just feeling better about where they live (Matarasso, *Use* 49).

As for the evolving sense of identity, we should remember that it is often our artists who project a vision of who we are—as John Ralston Saul has stated: “When the time comes for non-Canadians to buy, to negotiate, to travel, Canada’s chance, or the attitude toward Canada, will already have been determined to a surprising extent by the projection of our culture abroad” (quoted in Wyman 28). In *The Defiant Imagination*, Wyman states:

The stories we tell each other—in our plays, our books, our films—affirm the importance of the human, the local, the specific: they are the crackly bits that give society texture in the face of the blender forces of globalization...a diverse cultural expression that asserts the primacy of the human and the humane must be a fundamental component of the new Canada. (5-7)

All of this, as a background, leads us to ask questions about some of the key cultural groups in Kamloops, and the nature of their role in engaging community. Since we are studying our community partner, Western Canada Theatre, I would like to explore more specific background about audiences and community engagement.

## *LOOKING AT PROFESSIONAL THEATRE*

Some of the questions we have been asking are: Does local professional theatre matter? In what ways? What is the role of theatre in its community? Should it do more than entertain? What does it do, or perhaps, what *should* it do for its community? These questions, and many others jumping out from these, are ones that we ask as we look at professional theatre companies in three cities in British Columbia: Kamloops, Prince George, and Nanaimo. As a part of the Thompson Rivers University CURA research program, we committed to the general focus of studying culture and quality of life in small cities (those with populations between 50,000 and 150,000); in this larger endeavour, we are happy to be working alongside an impressive group of academics--historians, sociologists, geographers, as well as many local partners. Working in alliance with community groups is what CURA, which stands for Community University Research Alliance, an initiative in federal funding for scholarly research, is all about. In our particular studies, we worked with Western Canada Theatre in Kamloops, Theatre Northwest in Prince George, and TheatreOne in Nanaimo.

Why ask these questions? For two reasons: first, our basic CURA-related inquiry began with our interest, both theoretical and practical, in the contribution to community that professional theatre companies make; this we later modified to a wider examination of the nature of the relationship between these theatre companies and their respective communities. This would hopefully give us some new and valuable information that we could turn into some interesting and insightful conference papers and articles. This photographic exhibition was one way of evoking a public discussion.

But we also worked closely with our community professionals—the hardworking theatre folks who bring you annual seasons of quality theatre productions—and we must meet their needs too. What are these needs? Well, the truth is that each company strives to offer a range of activities, both on stage and off, that will connect to the community. The ultimate goal of course is to “put bums in seats,” so necessary to meet the financial requirements of operating fully professional companies where salaries and staging costs must be paid. Every theatre director knows of companies that have gone bankrupt; even major ones such as Bastion in Victoria and the Playhouse in Vancouver have either folded completely or come close to termination. Not long ago, Kelowna’s professional theatre company, Sunshine Theatre, ceased to be a producing company—it now operates a season of hosting touring shows. Recently, Nanaimo’s TheatreOne suddenly, devastatingly, had to cancel the remaining two mainstage shows of their season, “in order to avoid an operational deficit,” according to the company’s website. Clearly there can be serious disruptions, along with the plain fact that professional companies need to adjust to a rapidly changing theatrical environment with its shifting population demographics, increasing demands for accountability from civic funding bodies, and growing competition from other local theatre groups who sometimes operate as semi-professional—and occasionally seem more focussed and imaginative in their programming. So it is beneficial to learn all we can about the relationship between professional theatre companies and their audiences—and their wider communities.

### LOOKING AT AUDIENCES

Who are the people who attend? Is there a “typical” audience member? Do we know much about this person? One approach is to learn what we can about audiences, beginning with their general demographics. According to Hill Strategies, a Canadian group who regularly conduct research into the Arts, 23% of the Canadian population, 15 and older, attended theatre performances (drama, musical theatre, dinner theatre, or comedy) in 2005, the last year studied (See Hill, *Factors* 10-18). Two big factors that seem to have a bearing on who attends are education and income, along with living in an urban area and activity limitations. Education appears to be the strongest demographic factor: people with at least a bachelor’s degree have over twice the attendance rate (57%) than those with less than a high school diploma (24%). Perhaps not surprisingly, attendance increases with income, people with incomes of over \$100,000 having double the attendance (59%) as that of people with incomes less than \$20,000 (29%).

Other less striking but nonetheless important factors are living in larger urban areas and activity limitations. If you live in what the study calls a larger urban centre you are 1.3 times more likely to attend the performing arts than those who don’t; similarly, if you are not limited by a health or physical condition you are 1.3 times more likely to attend than those who are. Other factors, such as sex, age, whether or not you have children, your country of birth and language, have little impact. We know that women

What does being an audience member of Western Canada Theatre mean to you?

As an audience member of WCT I feel a connection to the Arts community, even if only in a small way. I look forward to the diversity of theatre offered by WCT. Live theatre is always thrilling to experience.

DEE BAILLIE

tend to attend in higher proportions than men, but the figures are close (44% of women attended a live performance in 2005, compared to 39% of men).

But the most important factors, according to Hill, are non-demographic. It seems that if you have the “arts-bug”, you are more likely to attend. How do you get the “arts-bug”? Can it be spread around? It begins with early exposure to the arts: childhood experience in the arts is an important factor in later participation in cultural events, according to this study. Then, performing arts attendance is highest for those people who reported attending another type of performance, such as dance or opera, or who went to a cultural festival, or who visited an art gallery or museum. In other words, cultural forms tend to share audiences. The study concludes:

Overall, the statistics imply that cultural experiences and cultural exposure are more important factors in cultural activities than most demographic factors. In other words, there is an arts-interested public that transcends demographic analysis. Those who get the arts go to a range of things. Those who don’t “get it” don’t go. (Hill, *Arts Elitist?* 3)

### WHAT AUDIENCES GET

But why attend at all? What gets you there? What personal benefits do you get? What does attending live performance *do* for you? One study found that the single best predictor of a satisfying performance is “the expectation of an enjoyable experience” (Hill, *Arts Research Monitor* 2). In other words, if you fully expect a great show you are more likely to get one than if your expectations are low or non-existent. Contributing to this happy pre-performance anticipation are marketing methods, your cultural background, and the amount of contextual information you have. If you have read or heard local media previews and interviews of a show, overheard good reports from acquaintances, maybe know some of the players involved, you are much more likely to attend—and enjoy. Mostly though, you go to see plays as a social event.

Specifically, one report (Hill, *Arts Research Monitor*) lists six intrinsic impacts a live performance can have on you: captivation, intellectual stimulation, emotional resonance, spiritual value, aesthetic growth, and social bonding. The last is certainly a key value in attending. A major American study (Ostrower 9-14) reports that “the most common motivations for attending cultural events were wanting to socialize (57%), and finding the event emotionally rewarding (53%).” The figure for theatre attendance is even higher: 68% of people reported they attend theatre primarily to socialize with family and friends.

This last study makes an interesting point: that people have *different* motivations for attending the various arts events. While we primarily go to see a play for social reasons, most people (65%) report that their reason for going to a museum or art gallery is to gain knowledge or to learn something. Another big motivator for play attendance is the desire to experience high-quality art, which half the respondents indicated as a major motivation.

On a personal level, your quality of life improves—and you just might live longer! Hill tells us that, along with the great pleasure you get from an arts experience, your happiness and sense of well-being similarly increase. For example, in the area of health, “A workplace with pieces of art on display can reduce stress and also reduce the rate of turnover of the employees,” while “attendance at cultural events, reading books or periodicals, making music or singing in a choir, appeared to reduce the risks of mortality within the time period of the study” (Hill, “Social Effects” 8). How does Kamloops do? Rachel LeBlanc, who conducted a local survey, reports that, “overall, Kamloops residents are pleased with the quality of life.” In

the city's 2001 *Citizen Satisfaction Survey*, respondents reported the quality of life in the city as Excellent (16.5%) or Good (77.7%); of these people, 60% said they visited the Sagebrush Theatre from one to six times a year—the Sagebrush being the “most visited” venue when compared to the Museum or Art Gallery (10).

So much for the individual—what are the social benefits of attending live performance? An interesting study began in Montreal in 2004, when, under the auspices of the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Canada Council for the Arts, experts from Canada, the United States, and Europe came together to examine the social effects of culture. They defined culture broadly, including the creative arts, both professional and amateur, heritage activities, the industries that support them, as they did participation: including audiences (users of culture), artists and producers (people engaged in the creation of culture), and what they call “stewards” (people who administer or otherwise enable cultural production). They found three categories of benefits: personal, instrumental, and social. While instrumental benefits might be such things as educational outcomes, perhaps the main finding of the Montreal study was how the arts, culture and heritage contribute to community building, or what they call “citizenship capacity” (Stanley 2-3).

This is how it works: you go to see a play—initially it's just for entertainment, so it gives you a fun excuse to join other folks for sheer common enjoyment. It's also a social event so you tend to build relationships and a sense of belonging with fellow participants: this alone probably stimulates your thinking in new ways or at least confirms a sense of group identification and consensus. It's also an *arts* event—and these typically present you with images and ideas of people relating to each other in various ways: some will inspire you, some you'll be critical of; all of them have to do with social relationships and will perhaps challenge you to assert or modify your own social values. Thus the arts experience builds up your social repertoire and you just might feel more inclined to interact and cooperate with others in attaining collective community goals.

All in all, the experience seems to help make you a more caring citizen. One study shows how people who regularly participate in cultural activities score higher in community service than those who don't. Performing arts attendees score higher (48%) in volunteering than non-attendees (28%), donate to worthy causes at a greater level (85% vs. 71%), and are more likely to do a neighbour a favour (73% vs. 67%) than non-attendees.

So, as you look over this photo essay of these fourteen community *volunteer* folks, and read their responses to Western Canada Theatre, which are also neatly summed up in the next article by Ginny Ratsoy, we hope you will reflect on the work of this company—as well as other arts organizations in Kamloops. Maybe one day you too will get a phone call from someone asking about the value of culture in our fair city....

If you could change  
one thing about  
Western Canada  
Theatre, what  
would it be?



The shows truly ought to be more edgy and risky. The young could be far better inspired by such an approach than by staid “Family-Fare”.



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