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ENGAGING NEW AUDIENCES: A RESPONSE TO NON-ATTENDEES SURVEYS BASED ON BEST PRACTICES

*Get the poem outdoors under any pretext,
reach through the open window if you have to,
kidnap it right off the poet's desk,
then walk the poem in the garden, hold it up
among the soft yellow garlands of the willow,
...
tell it to sing again, loud and then louder so it
brings the whole neighbourhood out...
- Raymond Souster, 1969*

This article considers the responses of infrequent and non-attendees to a survey of their responses to Kamloops' Western Canada Theatre. It discusses distinct, largely extra-performance best practices, mostly in theatres with similar focuses in Canada – with an emphasis on small cities. These practices were designed, in the main, to attract and engage infrequent and non-attendees to theatre, although many of them also enhance the well being of frequent attendees. In fact, in a survey of over twenty five dance companies in the USA, Dance/USA found diverse opinion on whether extra-performance activities enhanced the experience of existing audiences or attracted new audiences: “Some respondents felt that both deepening and broadening the audiences were results of engagement activities, while others indicated that a deeper audience can help broaden the audience, and still others suggested that broader audiences can become more deeply connected” (“Audience Engagement, 6). Thus, while the practices discussed in this chapter are focused on broadening, they may well have beneficial deepening side-effects.

In her influential book *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, Susan Bennett notes that empirical studies of audience have been instrumental in providing major theatre companies with demographics of their existing audiences, but little has been done to survey the vast majority of those who do not attend those major institutions. This has led, she writes, to “maintenance of the existing relationship between mainstream production and the small percentage of the population who attend” (89). Bennett recommends extending surveys to audiences who attend other venues, “from community theatre to outdoor performance events” (90). Although Bennett might categorize the companies in our study as more regional than mainstream, and although the “other venues” she recommends may be more prevalent in the large cities on which her analysis is focused, we saw validity in her suggestions. In fact, we took our survey further, by following Catherine Murray’s suggestion that it is “important to focus on non- or infrequent participants, to understand potential audiences” (33). To that end, we extended our surveys beyond the audiences of the three professional theatres that are the subject of our study by

surveying not only audiences at other venues but also community organizations across a wide spectrum, as well as students and instructors at a facility for immigrants and a cross section of a university community who are infrequent, rare or non-attendees. Necessarily, we posed questions quite different from those typical of the usual theatre-generated demographic-oriented surveys: questions designed to gauge their awareness of the existence of professional theatre in their community, their perceptions of the role of theatre companies in their city, and their opinions on what companies could do to engage a broader spectrum of the community.

The results suggest the awareness of the presence and value of a theatre company is high. “Very needed” “significant to many” “necessary” and “important” were typical responses. Respondents evinced an awareness of professional theatre and were forthcoming with their perceptions on what the role of professional theatre should be. In fact, their responses in this category of questions were not much different from those of regular attendees. For example, they share with regular attendees a belief that the theatre company’s role is primarily to provide entertainment. Likewise, they value the artistic and social function of theatre; typical responses to a question about the present role of a professional company in its community include “bringing people together in the most traditional form of entertainment” and “an important part of our growing community, providing the arts to our public.” As did the frequent attendees, this group emphasized various educational aspects of theatre, such as promoting local talent, providing acting classes and other training opportunities for school-age audiences, and generally supporting the community’s dramatic arts. Both groups perceive the bequest responsibilities of professional theatre as especially significant.

The responses of this group were also not dissimilar to the frequent attendees’ responses in their heterogeneity of preferences. “Big-name shows” are advocated by some; fewer musicals and more “serious plays” and “queer content” are proposed by others. The other side of the coin to having a captive audience when you are the only professional company in town is the pressure to be all things to all people. However, interestingly, recommendations on specific play genres were scarce among this group.

Instead, responses tended to be construed in terms of a larger framework. Infrequent and non-attendees tend to place a greater emphasis on the importance of a broader vision of theatre than their frequent attendee counterparts. Here, too, professional theatre rates well. Respondents see the most important things Western Canada Theatre does as make Kamloops a community, connect people with people, prepare activities for people to participate in, provide a socio-cultural outlet, share stories, broaden our minds, and support and help our community. Implicit in these responses is a recognition, not only of theatre’s social nature but also of its potential as a facilitator of tri-fold well being, especially social well being.

If, overall, infrequent and non-attendees are, like “regulars,” positive in their perceptions of Western Canada Theatre, they differ somewhat in their conceptions of what professional theatre could do better. Their suggestions tend to be more specific and homogeneous.

Perhaps the most noteworthy difference is an increased emphasis on advertising and accessibility. Multiple responses to questions designed to elicit suggestions for improvement took the form of a single word: advertising. Respondents perceive a lack of awareness about the company and recommend more publicity. They also frequently pinpoint accessibility of tickets as an issue (for example, the box office centre hours and location were cited as issues) and detect perceptions of pricing as a deterrent to attendance, suggesting lower rates, donation of tickets to economically disadvantaged, and pricing packages such as two-for-one coupons.

Members of this broader demographic place somewhat greater emphasis on the social and political

aspects of theatre in their recommendations. Suggestions to create more volunteer activities, be more politically active, address social and political issues more frequently, “broaden customer base,” “embrace this community’s diverse ethnic populations with plays that mirror their challenges and successes” and “bring community issues such as homelessness to light” also indicate an awareness of the efficacy of theatre beyond its entertainment value. Clearly, this group recognizes theatre’s potential for social change.

If this heterogeneous group is aware of the existence of professional theatre in the community, places high value on it in various ways, and has recommendations on how it can further engage the community, one would assume members of it would be open to expanding their engagement with professional theatre. The central question of this chapter is how to broaden engagement: how to connect with a wider spectrum of the community. It is a question facing virtually every other arts organization, as well as universities and colleges, and, indeed, community groups of all sorts. For example, the first goal of Thompson Rivers University’s 2007-2012 Strategic Plan is “Student Engagement”, with an emphasis on experiential learning and sustainability of communities, and it encompasses nine points that range from the global to the on campus. Because the term is so widely and broadly used, it has come to have a variety of denotations. Therefore, answers to questions of how to engage a community are similarly varied; it is a question to which different answers are applicable in each community. As Bell and Jayne state, “The urban world is not made up of a handful of global metropolises, but characterized by heterogeneity” (“Small Cities?” 683). Addressing these questions, organizations look both inward – reflecting on their history and current situation – and outward – to the local, provincial, national, and global. This article is intended as a stimulus, not a prescription. By describing and examining the best practices of Theatre North West, Theatre One, and Western Canada Theatre, and augmenting that survey with select practices of other, similar companies (mostly in Canada), we hope to provide further resources for the small city theatre companies to explore in their ongoing projects of enhancing the vitality and social capital of their respective communities.

First, an anecdote about the success of an “open house” model in Europe. A highlight of my visiting professorship to Germany in the spring of 2002 was the Long Night of the Museums in Erfurt, a city of about 200,000 near the geographical centre of the country. My husband and I, fortunate to have former exchange students from the university where I teach as unofficial tour guides, enjoyed the festival atmosphere as we drank in the exhibits at both galleries and museums, as well as a memorable fashion show (complete with accordion music by an elderly local woman) highlighting the GDR era. This collaboration between cultural groups strengthened the bonds among members of the city’s cultural community and engaged tourists such as ourselves, but, more importantly, it afforded citizens a communal, informal atmosphere in which to get acquainted or further familiarize themselves with each other and *their* cultural community. Such an event is a leveller: dress is informal, prices are low, all ages attend, and any fear of not fitting in quickly vanishes. Even its evening scheduling increases its popularity and accessibility, as well as adding a dramatic dimension. It provides a sampler – an overview – from which attendees can make decisions about future cultural choices.

The Long Night of the Museums, while it is a popular model followed throughout Germany and elsewhere, is tailored to the interests of the community it serves, often incorporating local themes. For example, in 2009, Berlin, which now holds the event twice a year, commemorated the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, while Erfurt celebrated the 90th anniversary of Weimar Bauhaus architecture – with the participation with approximately 200 students and twelve professors from Erfurt Polytechnic – in conjunction with its annual Long Night. The Berlin model, in which a single, very reasonably priced ticket allows participants entry to all museums as well as free shuttle service, has proven so popular that it led to the Berlin Night of Theatre and Operas, where over sixty stages host short, back-to-back performances – as well as being adopted and adapted throughout the world.

The “long night” model clearly offers endless possibilities for adaptation. It serves as an exemplar for this article because of the multi-level possibilities for broader engagement than is usual for a single arts organization in a conventional venue: citizens and tourists with local history; arts organizations with other arts organizations and non-arts organizations; broad-based citizen engagement; community members as participants, and student engagement, for example.

In fact, in 2008 Canada adopted and in 2010 implemented an equally engaging model: Culture Days. This three-day pan-Canadian event has noble egalitarian goals, to:

- Foster appreciation and support of the artistic and cultural life that is lived, created and expressed across the country in urban centers and rural communities alike.
- Stimulate and strengthen a sense of ownership of arts and culture by citizens in their local communities.
- Promote direct interaction between creators and citizens, as a key to increasing understanding and appreciation for art and culture.
- Affirm that every citizen is the guardian of the cultural life of his or her community.

Although Culture Days has had a presence in at least one of the cities in our study – Kamloops – that presence has to date been small and not particularly collaborative or citizen-centred. Perhaps the aspirations of Culture Days are best approached incrementally by theatre companies in these small cities: by reviewing their own, each others’ and others’ practices that can eventually lead to “creator/citizen interaction” that in turn may lead to increased audiences.

Open houses and behind-the-scenes tours have the potential to initiate this. They not only enhance the well being of existing audiences but also encourage new audiences by presenting an informal, non –threatening introduction to the uninitiated. Exposure to the theatre in an informal context may make the uninitiated more likely to cross the threshold of the theatre in the more formal context of a theatrical performance. In their quantitative study of audience choices of theatre venues, Agneessens and Roose make a very relevant observation in this regard:

Assumed characteristics of the other members of the audience will mark the choice. The social imbeddedness refers to such things as “feeling out of place” or “being uncomfortable” in a theater due to the presence of others who are dissimilar from oneself with regard to certain characteristics. Mostly these characteristics are associated with social distance or are to a large extent class-based. (206)

Both physical unfamiliarity and social distance may make the possibility of theatre attendance daunting to the uninitiated. Who has not, for example, felt out of place in a new social setting, whether that be because of the architecture of the setting, the dress and demeanour of those in attendance, or myriad other social and cultural factors? To back up just a bit, theatre scholar Ric Knowles notes that much scholarly attention has been paid to the fact that “Perhaps the most prominent entry point into the theatrical experience ... is the façade or public face of the theatre building itself” (71). Before the individual enters the theatre, he or she is confronted by an architecture that can be subjectively perceived in a spectrum from inviting to intimidating. Thus, the theatre itself comes with a range of social codes that might be construed as exclusionary. Staging open houses is one means of bridging social gaps.

Ted Price and Anne Laughlin, founders of Theatre North West, discovered an audience hungry for theatre when they began the company in 1994, yet some of the audience may not have realized that hunger were it not for certain physical realities of the theatre building itself. Price describes their venue: “It looks like an old retail space, which is exactly what it was.” Laughlin analyzes the openness and visibility

of the lobby from the outside as initially and continually significant: “I think that was really important, [people] could see, before they opened that door, what was beyond those doors. So it was not going to be a surprise that they maybe didn’t like, and they felt comfortable with [the lobby].” One of the reasons for the initial and continuing popularity of the company, they maintain, is their policy of keeping the company “as unpretentious and ordinary” as possible, a cultural extension of the company’s physical setting that has informed such company practices as their informal opening night social.

Although in smaller cities such as Kamloops, Nanaimo, and Prince George, the meaning ascribed to a theatre’s building may be less distinctive from that ascribed to its surroundings, and the class-based, social distance factors may be less acute than in larger centres, I suggest, and our surveys indicate, they are present, nonetheless. Another common approach to bridging these differences in arts is to get the work outdoors – to, in a sense, bring the play to the audience. Such long –running programs as the highly popular Music in the Park in Kamloops – a free-of-charge nightly series of musical performances in a downtown park in the summer months – indicate the sustainability of outdoors arts in the small-city setting.

Multiple factors, no doubt, account for the success of outdoor theatre. While the productions range from “classical” imports to newly-created, site-specific productions designed with a local audience in mind, the most successful integrate the performance with the natural setting. Furthermore, outdoor public spaces transcend social differences, and their possibilities for attracting new audiences is certainly worth reflecting upon: for instance, in the more relaxed outdoor setting, audience participation may seem a natural outgrowth, a wider age and class demographic is usually appealed to, and the “uncaptive” audience is momentarily captive and could be induced to complete brief surveys or participate in interviews designed to gauge what would encourage them to consider more sustained engagement.

While the current seasons of Theatre One, Theatre North West, and Western Canada Theatre – fall, winter, and spring – and other logistics might make sustained, full- scale outdoor production challenging, the companies themselves provide examples of creative use of the outdoors, either as an occasional play site or as a publicity venue. For example, in conjunction with their 2006 production of *Being Frank*, Theatre One staged “sneak previews” at selected downtown venues. This led to a continuing project, “Street Theatre” which subsequently took a variety of forms; for example, in 2008, “From Coalmines to Bathub Races” was a series of six works based on previous Theatre One productions that dealt with Nanaimo’s history. Theatre One commissioned a local playwright, Michael Armstrong, to write them, and fostered community development further by hiring youth as actors. Western Canada Theatre, in a memorable 1991 collaboration with Armstrong’s Caravan Farm Theatre, staged *The Nativity* on the grounds adjacent to a church on Kamloops Indian Band territory. More recently, one Saturday, Western Canada Theatre “got the play outside” and publicized an upcoming Pavilion Theatre offering when touring company members performed skits in the school grounds adjacent to the highly popular Kamloops Farmers Market, a venue that has been successful at attracting a wide demographic for over thirty years and that regularly incorporates musical acts into its operations. These examples, perhaps even more than open houses, break down perceived social barriers and leave a strong imprint on the visual memory of the community.

A salient example of a small-city adaptation of two popular national trends is provided by New Brunswick’s Saint John Theatre Company, which has taken pages from both the popular pan-Canadian Fringe Festival and the summer Shakespearean model and given them a distinctly local flavour. “Theatre on the Edge” stages locally-written works, improv, and “alternative Shakespeare.” In a further move that involves local talent, it has sponsored a twenty-four hour play writing challenge, “Winging It.” All of this –incorporating as it does both the community and the dramatic canon – is likely to catch the eyes of a wide spectrum of regular and occasional attendees, and the fact that this summer festival is centered

outdoors – in a parking lot – indicates a laudable desire to connect with a larger segment of the local community.

Sustained examples of creative use of the outdoors – where the outdoors is centre stage rather than an offshoot or occasional venture – abound. For example, outdoor summer Shakespeare performances are numerous across Canada and elsewhere, Vancouver’s Bard on the Beach and Kamloops’s Project X Fest being but two salient examples close to home. Armstrong, BC’s Caravan Theatre has had continuing success – since 1978 – with varied programming. While much of that popularity is no doubt due to programming tailored to a largely rural and small-city audience, the fact that it stages outdoor works – in both summer and winter – holds considerable appeal to its audience, which covers a wide demographic spectrum. Indeed the company’s website makes much of its *lack* of a theatre building, as well as its locality and inclusivity; its stated mission is “to create meaningful, popular theatre for a broad and diverse family audience,” which it executes “by creating original works that explore political and social issues, and whose settings, characters and language are a reflection of the contemporary rural British Columbian experience.” In an urban setting, companies take advantage of the variety of outdoor locations to involve non-traditional audiences and create collaborations; Vancouver’s Boca del Lupo, for example, with an avowed purpose of engaging “young and old, theatregoers and non-theatregoers” has improvised stages in various city parks, partnered with groups as diverse as Vancouver Opera, Vancouver Parks Board, and the Squamish Nation, and involved countless volunteers in almost a decade of productions. Freeing the play from the confines of a structure can result in liberation on a variety of levels.

In fact, the recent proliferation and popularity of performances in a wide variety of outdoor and unconventional venues may already have caused a shift in audience perception, according to Susan Bennett. In her analysis of Robert Lepage and Ex Machina’s *The Image Mill*, a multimedia, site-specific outdoor installation created in 2008 for Quebec City’s 400th anniversary celebration, Bennett asserts that audiences of the past few decades have become so accustomed to non-traditional spaces that range from parks to shopping malls that place itself is being increasingly perceived as theatrical, and site-specific performance has encouraged audiences to “rehearse, shift and comprehend the everyday as well as the extraordinary, and to do so in the context of landscape” (“Peripatetic” 9). She credits such performance spaces with making more concrete and tangible such aspects of viewing as “interpretation, space, duration, attention, interaction, feedback and so on” with the result that a “peripatetic audience” which rewrites the contract between production and reception” is created (“Peripatetic” 10,13). That is, how we perceive a play is affected by where we see that play, and repeated spectating of plays in these unconventional venues can permanently reset our expectations of the playgoing experience in general. The varied venues have re-educated existing audiences and created new ones. All recognize the potential for performance inherent in space in general and are becoming used to a new, closer relationship with performance as it moves beyond the conventional formal indoor theatre space – and takes the audience with it.

A further proven method of broadening and enhancing community well being are partnerships of various kinds, which have been a mainstay for arts groups. These can be informal and “unofficial” – such as the sharing of personnel and venues – or more formal and public: ongoing or convenient “one offs” when, for example, the theme of a particular play is a natural fit with a particular community group. They are most common among theatre companies and other arts groups, but my surveying indicates a great deal of creative thinking beyond the arts, in some cases with the teaming of theatre with the most apparently unlikely community groups.

Community partnerships, official and otherwise, of theatre companies are often quite convenient and organic in small and medium-sized cities; in fact, they may be inherent in the structure, rather than deliberate or planned. Theatre and other arts companies may be sharing venues at times, and the chances are good they are sharing audiences in some measure. When professional companies are faced with new

amateur, professional, or semi-professional competition, they are aware that the “audience pool” is limited; a mutually beneficial approach is collaboration or crossover, rather than contest. Western Canada Theatre is exemplary in this regard. Over the years, its crossovers with small companies created by young people, such as *Three Men of Sin*, *Project X*, and *Saucy Fops*, have resulted in enhanced opportunities for the younger set to receive professional experience, exposure of WCT audiences to potentially more “edgy” theatre, as well as the opportunity for younger audiences to experience more mainstream work. More recently, crossovers with *Saucy Fops* have become more formal, with the 2009-2010 season featuring *Audible*, written by *Saucy Fops* co-founder Cayman Duncan, which the small company staged in the shared venue of the Pavilion in 2006 and toured in the Fringe Festival the same year. WCT Artistic Producer Jeremy Tow managed to provide thematic coherence to his season as well as foster emerging talent. As the season brochure read, “A companion piece to *The Miracle Worker* - WCT is proud to assist with the development of this riveting script, supporting the work of local playwright Cayman Duncan.” Victoria’s Belfry Theatre provides another example of a creative artistic partnership that increases audience exposure to all parties with its programming, as part of its annual SPARK festival, of several very short plays, prior to its mainstage production, which are free of charge and performed by actors from some of the city’s independent companies. Such collaborations seem natural and are certainly in keeping with community perceptions of professional theatre as having a strong educational mandate.

Partnerships with other arts organizations also seem a natural fit for small cities and benefit the community by both enhancing the experiences of crossover audiences and exposing audiences who are devotees of one art form to the potential benefits of another. In Kamloops, Western Canada Theatre has worked on events that generate both awareness and funds, such as the Thirtieth Anniversary Celebrations of professional arts in Kamloops and the annual Mayors’ Gala for the Arts. More artistic crossovers are evident in their work with such groups as BC Living Arts (whose endeavours, while focused on music, encompass everything from gardening to photography and opera) whose director’s expertise has been put to use in WCT musicals. Annual crossovers have also proven successful for such companies as Lethbridge’s New West Theatre, which collaborates with the Lethbridge Big Band each December in what NWT describes as “our recipe for a wonderful event: take your most cherished holiday tunes, add in some of New West Theatre’s lively performers, and fill the air with the sounds of an astonishing big band.” Kitchener, Ontario’s MT Space sees “combination and cross-pollination of performance, discussion, and visibility to the public” as core elements of its operation in the community, and has fulfilled that mission by co-producing art exhibits, film screenings, and even community-building conferences.

Cross-fertilization with other arts *venues* provides further opportunities to reach a larger and more diverse audience. Kamloops’s BC Living Arts, for example, has taken advantage of the space of the main exhibition area of the Kamloops Art Gallery to present such musical entertainment as its fall “Canadian Cabaret”. Nanaimo’s Theatre One has expanded its venues beyond the Port Theatre and made an important connection to the youth and professional segment of the community by staging some work at Vancouver Island University’s Malaspina Theatre. Here again, other arts venues may or may not be suitable for complete productions, but skits and the like (I am reminded of the popular practice of WCT in the 1980’s of staging “previews” at such venues as the KAG) as means to encourage fine and performance arts and museum patrons to attend – perhaps in conjunction with other special events at these venues – may prove fruitful in community building.

Francis Ostrower’s study recommends a “non-dedicated arts venue” – a place whose primary function is not arts-related but occasionally incorporates arts programming – such as a club, restaurant, or coffee house – as a likely site to attract regular theatergoers to performances by companies other than those they usually patronize, but his recommendation may have some utility for attracting new audience members as well. Alternative indoor performance venues may be limited in small cities, but alternative venues for “sneak previews” abound, and these have the added attraction of being frequented by a

wider demographic than arts venues. Some dance companies in the “Audience Engagement” study, for example, reported that presentations and demonstrations in libraries and communities centres fostered family connections, and others that work place performances broadened audience (3,8). Lunch-time performances and seasonal celebrations are also possibilities. For example, the Smorgasbord Delicatessen, a small restaurant on the edge of Kamloops’s downtown, has held a variety of musical evenings to celebrate Christmas, Valentine’s Day, and Mardi Gras, involving members of the Kamloops Symphony Orchestra and other local musicians. Vancouver’s Newworld Theatre has sold out shows at restaurants along trendy and ethnically diverse Commercial Drive with its “Bite of the Underground” variety shows that focus on social justice, diversity, and fun, and aim “to provide a common ground for artists and audiences to cross pollinate and discover new voices.” Creative selection of venue can not only build community but also broaden audience.

Ostrower’s study has also led to the suggestion that collaboration *beyond* the arts should be considered: “Given the high correlation between associational memberships and cultural participation, cultural institutions might explore whether there are ways to work with associations to expand their role in engaging audiences (23).” This might be done through theatre employees assuming roles in local non-arts boards, through theatres approaching groups whose interests might be a likely fit with the theme of an upcoming play, and through collaboration with community groups such as multicultural organizations, in *the creation* of a play. The latter could not only attract new audiences to the play, but, because of the sense of ownership actual participation in the process would entail, create a more diverse long-term audience base and do much for a community’s well being.

A notable illustration of such a non-arts collaboration among the three companies in our study is that of Western Canada Theatre with the Secwepemc Cultural Education Society and other Aboriginal groups and individuals in the 2004 production of *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*. Not only did the Aboriginal community act as consultants and participants in the creation of the play, but the company was also able to make connections across the province which they were able to build upon to draw more Aboriginal audiences for such works as David Diamond’s play METH (which Headlines Theatre produced and WCT sponsored for a Kamloops showing in 2007) and their own 2009 co-production with the National Arts Centre of George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (with Aboriginal actors in Aboriginal roles, and for the first time in a professional production, an Aboriginal director, Yvette Nolan). In fact, WCT has subsequently made a practice of featuring famous Aboriginal actors such as Margo Kane and Lorne Cardinal in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal roles.

A survey of practices further afield indicates a variety of sustained innovative partnerships that recognize distinct populations within a specific community and are responsive to community needs. At one end of the social scale, since 1990 the Manitoba Theatre Centre has teamed with the Manitoba Bar Association, whose lawyers and judges have volunteered thousands of hours in the production of an annual “Community Play.” Similarly, Ottawa’s Great Canadian Theatre Company, for about a decade, has annually staged a “Lawyer Play” (the production varies from year to year, but involves a legal theme) that has involved “more than 250 lawyers, judges and magistrates... in over 100,000 hours of preparation.” Such an annual event has the advantage of cultivating an audience generated from the group being represented, as well as their family and friends; sustained performance can, over time, create a new demographic in a company’s audience. Calgary’s Alberta Theatre Projects’ ongoing partnership involves a far different demographic. ATC teams with over 130 charitable organizations to redirect “potentially unused tickets for distribution to deserving kids and their families.” In this single project, ATC is making numerous valuable contacts with fellow community groups, fostering potential audiences, and bridging all-too-real societal gaps – thereby acting as agents for social change, something our surveys indicate is a priority in the small city. Understanding the particular needs of a specific city could lead to sustained relationships that might initially seem unlikely but could prove of ongoing value to all partners.

Collaborations between organizations whose activities may seem at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum are also a possibility, particularly because the theatres in our study exist in a larger context in which sport and outdoor activities are emphasized. Although sport and art seem as often as not to be competitors as partners, the 2010 Winter Olympics provide numerous examples of potential for collaboration, such as the staging of a community history play in conjunction with local Olympic celebrations, employing both novice actors, and, as happened in Kamloops, the local acting troupe Saucy Fops. If, as former Project X Theatre's co-Director Samantha MacDonald has asserted, the Kamloops Blazers Junior Hockey Team is a competitor with theatre for attendance, there is obviously some crossover audience; perhaps some creative collaboration is possible among these two very lively – and live – forms of engagement. As well, Prince George, Nanaimo, and Kamloops all possess enviable natural settings, well appreciated by their respective citizens, so theatre partnerships with athletic and outdoor activity groups may prove a natural fit.

As I noted in the introduction to this article, theatre companies' conventional surveys are designed to, among other things, analyze the demographics of their existing audience, a practical endeavour, no doubt; yet indications are that companies would be well served to also examine the changing demographics of their communities as a whole, particularly senior citizens. According to cultural policy researcher David A. Foote, almost one-fifth of Canada's population could be seniors by 2021 (94). It is a rapidly growing demographic in each of the three cities in our study. In 1983, Western Canada Theatre involved residents of seniors homes in interviews that formed the basis of the play *Timestep*, by Campbell Smith. Almost thirty years later, much indicates that seniors in the small city are to be found in a variety of additional locations, involved in a variety of community activities, and attracted to further engagement. Most obviously, several of those who volunteered for our Audience Show exhibition and consented to phone interviews fit the demographic. Non-arts groups are also recognizing and acknowledging the community contributions and potential of senior citizens. A recent local project that was remarkably successful in engaging the community was the Kamloops Women's Resource Group Society's Untold Stories Project, which saw scores of volunteers of all ages and from a variety of walks of life interviewing and producing a book and art shows on select local senior women who had made exceptional volunteer contributions to the community. As well, seniors are organizing themselves in ways that reflect their desire for engagement; for example, since 2006 the Kamloops Adult Learners Society has existed with a mandate to "provide educational opportunities for retired persons in the Kamloops /Thompson region; offer, administer and conduct classes for retired persons; and promote the physical and mental well-being and quality of life of retired persons" in the area, among other things. KALS, relying on volunteer instructors who submit course proposals, has successfully offered courses on subjects as diverse as basic computing, birding, Southeast Asian cultures, astronomy, opera appreciation, and... local theatre. Western Canada Theatre has recently taken a step that goes beyond their special price for seniors' seasons subscriptions, by inviting some seniors from local retirement homes to their weekday matinees. Frequent attendees who are seniors surveyed said they also appreciated the 7:30 PM (rather than 8:00 PM) start times the company offers some evenings; perhaps this is something companies should consider in their quest to reach more seniors. If the number of seniors is increasing in the three small cities and they are increasingly active in their communities, their potential as a theatre audience could be tapped further through such recognition as that of London, Ontario's Grand Theatre, which has designated a specific spot in each production for a Senior Matinee, which includes a guest speaker involved in some aspect of that production in a "Tea Talk." The prospect of more seniors not only attending, but also volunteering and collaborating in, theatre is well worth further attention. Either individually or collectively, they appear to be a rich source of potential theatre engagement.

A final but important suggestion regarding creative community partnerships reflects the appetites of those surveyed for productions for and with multicultural communities and a recognition that 20% of

Canadians are immigrants, and 16% part of visible minorities (Saul, 312) . Looking to the future, Foote predicts 80% of Canada's population growth by 2030 will be provided by immigration (95). TheatreOne has acknowledged the multicultural component of its commitment to the development of emerging Canadian voices by producing such plays as Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children* and Marty Chan's *Best Left Buried*, both of which reflect the historical experience of Chinese immigrants in Nanaimo. Western Canada Theatre's mission statement includes the following statement: "The Company will entertain, educate, enrich, and interact with the cultural mosaic of its community" and its aforementioned work with Aboriginal communities is laudable in that regard. However, members of other communities perceive "a lack of education regarding Western Canada Theatre." As one respondent wrote, "Since Canada is a multicultural country, as immigrants we would like to know more about Canadian culture as well as to see something that represents our culture, too." These words represent an interest that is reflected in the Canadian population as a whole; an Environics study found that "fully eight-six percent of Canadians state that they are interested in arts in other cultures" (Murray 38). The need for a broader frame for cultural inclusion is, of course, more easily filled in larger cities with multiple professional companies, such as Toronto, where companies such as Cahoots Theatre interprets diversity as "gender, sexuality, ability, language and class" as well as "race, nation of origin and ethnicity, " and Vancouver, where, for example, Firehall Arts Centre puts into practice its mission to present "diverse and dynamic" theatre by presenting work of a similarly inclusive nature. Yet, even the mid-sized city of Victoria serves such audiences through PUENTE Theatre, whose mandate is to offer "theatrical experience as a bridge between cultures." PUENTE has collaborated with such organizations as the Full Spectrum Arts Society, The Inter-Cultural Association, Media-Net and Open Space Cultural Centre in order to fulfill that mandate. The success of the Western Canada Theatre experience with the Secwepemc Cultural Education Society could be replicated with other cultural groups in each of the small cities as companies increasingly recognize the diversity of their communities, and the number of organizations representing those diverse communities seek to decrease marginality by increasing visibility. It is also noteworthy that, according to John Ralston Saul, "every study shows new Canadians to be volunteering and donating as much as, often more than, other citizens" (314). Thus the desire for participation expressed in our surveys is borne out by quantitative research at the national level. However diversity is defined, it is important to look at the wide spectrum of possibilities it offers to theatre.

The survey responses of all categories of the community place a great deal of importance on the role of professional theatre in the lives of children and young people, and the three companies in our study have in various ways long recognized their duty to nurture the engagement of young people as audience. In fact, TheatreOne's short mission statement includes as one of its five purposes "to build an audience for the future through the involvement of young people", and the company achieves that aim through, among other things, its "Just Kidding" Series, which runs from late fall through early spring and offers subscription rates to both children and adults, as well as some complimentary tickets to the series "for the benefit of less fortunate families" through a relationship with the Nanaimo Boys and Girls Club. Although Western Canada Theatre does not feature children's programming, its Christmas offering is usually selected with an all-ages audience in mind, with such recent productions as *Alice – A Wonderland*, *Disney's Beauty and the Beast*, and *Suessical*. Furthermore, it offers matinees of virtually all of its mainstage productions to select local school students at greatly reduced prices, and these have long been augmented by study guides created by WCT personnel. Theatre North West has also held special matinees for students, sometimes providing free tickets, as well as inviting students to join the staff at work and making staff available for school visits. The three companies are taking admirable steps to cultivate appreciation of theatre among young people.

Best practices for children and young people across the country encompass *experiential* education such as acting classes, broader training in other aspects of theatre work, and a variety of playwriting opportunities in several creative configurations. Western Canada Theatre conducts spring break acting classes and longer summer acting classes for students that culminate in a production. Thunder Bay's

Magnus Theatre, in addition to touring plays to schools, sponsors the Young Playwrights Challenge, which invites teenagers from the region to submit scripts for assessment and possible production. Regina's "Globe on the Road" program offers schools in various centres in Saskatchewan a selection of twenty workshops in order to provide tailor-made, on-site sessions led by theatre professionals. The website of the Regina company provides a checklist for interested schools – and other organizations – to complete in accordance with their specific needs, such as acting and set design. Victoria's Belfry 101 Onstage involves high school students in adapting themes and images from the company's season to their own creations, which they stage in conjunction with the company's SPARK Festival. This immersive situation both intimately educates young people about the company's own work and fosters their creativity. St John's RCA Theatre Company has launched a series that sees high school, college, and university students working in seminars with Newfoundland playwrights on the students' scripts over a period of months, with select scripts culminating in public readings and prizes. Ottawa's Great Canadian Theatre Company's UTHINK, a partnership with two other Ottawa theatres and the Playwrights Guild of Canada, invites young people to create "stories and memories about Ottawa" and encourages multiple genres, including audio plays. The Chichester Festival Theatre, located in a small city in southern England near the University of Chichester (with whom Thompson Rivers University has an exchange agreement) offers not only student workshops but also classes to assist *drama teachers* in "developing the confidence and skills" and "using drama techniques as a creative tool throughout the curriculum." Bridging age barriers, fostering experiential opportunities, recognizing the broad potential that theatre has for education, and acknowledging the increasing role that technology plays in the lives of young people, programs such as these not only encourage the talents of young people already interested in theatre but also cultivate the interest of novices, teachers, and parents. It is worth noting that Ostrower's study found that "A significant minority of people (24%) who did not attend other events had gone to a student performance" and recommends that companies "work with schools to reach adults as well as children." There is certainly the possibility of engaging the relatives of the young actors, playwrights, and others involved in these projects by enhancing their awareness of the company; in fact, one of the dance companies in the "Audience Engagement" study created "parents plus kids" workshops in their school programs (2). The "advertising" recommended by our surveys of infrequent and non-attendees can take many forms, and experiential "advertising" often leaves a lasting effect.

University students are another segment of the population to which professional theatre companies have been increasingly attentive, and to whom they have much to offer in terms of well-being, perhaps ever more so in the contemporary age. As Foote notes, technology can have positive effects on citizenship, but "it can also affect citizenship in more negative ways such as the alienation of disengaged youth and the growth of 'smart mobs' with the use of mobile communications and computing devices" (96). Foote also detects a sign of the marginalization of young adults in their underrepresentation in voting turnout (94). Theatre, with its "real-world" social function, could provide a bridge to more engaged citizenship, an important diversion from an electronic culture, a training ground in which students from various disciplines can put theory into practice, a path from amateur to professional work, and much in between.

Our surveys indicate that the TRU community – even non regulars – has a genuine interest in local professional theatre, and, in fact, great respect for the company and its reputation, but that students in particular perceive barriers to access. Companies such as Theatre Northwest and Western Canada Theatre recognize that both affordability and scheduling are issues for post-secondary students by offering them special reduced rates: the Prince George company provides University of Northern British Columbia and College of New Caledonia students with discount rates of up to 80%, and Western Canada Theatre has become a well-known presence at the TRU Back-to-School Barbeque, where it offers students a substantially reduced rate on a season's pass; additionally, it has proven open to extending the high school student matinee to university students. Infrequent and non-attendees suggest an ongoing "campus presence" and increased on-campus advertising, with respondents praising the company's fall

offer to students, but finding themselves missing out when they cannot make the event and unaware that the offer extends past the date of the TRU event. Possibilities in this regard include, in the case of those communities with theatre programmes, collaborations between the training and professional companies, the staging of an annual event on campus, such as PUENTE does at Royal Roads University, and visibility of company materials – perhaps even ticket availability – at university box offices. Surveyed previous to the 2009-2010 season, when WCT began online ticketing, several students indicated a desire for online ticket purchases, others shuttles for students, and still others adjusting box office hours to reflect varied work schedules. Opportunities to purchase tickets in multiple ways and with as much economy and ease as possible are clearly in demand among university and college students.

As indicated elsewhere in this book, the CURA Mapping the Culture of Small Cities project has presented numerous opportunities for theatres to build on their existing relationships with university students. The three companies in our study have welcomed our research assistants into their spaces, where they performed a variety of activities, including archiving material, administering surveys, and providing support with communications functions to name but a few – all of which, from all reports, enhanced the well-being of the individual students, some of whom continued their relationships with the companies well past the time of their official involvement. Research Learning and Directed Studies models currently existing at Thompson Rivers University provide possibilities for this relationship to be ongoing. Indeed, as student engagement becomes a priority at universities globally, indications are that university administrations recognize the potential of such partnerships.

The stand alone Academic Service Learning model has proven efficacious for student development. The sustained model of the latter (students, singly or in small groups have community work as a course, thereby spending several hours each week over the course of a semester in a single placement) has resulted in both intangible and tangible relationships that extend beyond the length of the course. For instance, a student who completed two Service Learning courses working with WCT and is now a teacher, has transferred the knowledge acquired in her course to an innovative and popular special after- school program in the local school district that pairs arts and sport. She also assists the company with acting classes, and both activities are certainly contributing to her well-being. Service learning models vary from university to university, but theatres would do well to note that some, such as that at TRU, can be initiated by a community organization.

More formal and ongoing relationships between universities in small cities in Canada provide evidence of a mutual awareness of the benefits of theatre engagement to student well-being. The Globe Theatre, for instance, has had a partnership with the University of Regina's Faculty of Fine Arts in which selected students spend a semester at the theatre working and training in areas specific to their interests, including acting directing, set and costume design and construction, arts education, sound and lighting design, stage and production management, and arts administration. This internship program is impressive not only for the duration of experience it provides students, but also for the diversity of experiences. As co-op, leadership, and other internship programs develop as universities and colleges across the country increasingly incorporate community engagement into their strategic plans, the models for engaging post-secondary students from a variety of disciplines in theatre proliferate.

Given the popularity of cultural tourism in recent years, the reader may wonder at the paucity of suggestions relating to engaging tourists in theatre activity. The first and most apparent reason for the omission relates to the purpose of our Community-University Research Alliance: because we are measuring the quality of life in small cities, our focus has been on the relationships between arts organizations and citizens within those communities. But we have additional reasons. Research specifically on small cities suggests they be wary of the tourism model. David Bell and Mark Jayne, for example, caution that it “can produce a series of monocultural ‘unique’ small-city downtowns that are consumed, not by locals, but by

cosmopolitan visitors who want to consume localness and smallness” (11). In addition to excluding locals and commodifying the cityscape, tourism-focused approaches may be wrong for small cities because they “often lack a sustained year-round critical mass of trade and cultural activity generating the level of audiences, tourists and visitors that are required for regeneration” of the type that may be successful in large centres. (Evans and Foord, 155). Furthermore, tourism professionals indicate that what tourists want to see is what the locals have generated that is truly, distinctly local, rather than created for outside consumption, as my attraction to Erfurt’s Long Night of the Museums might suggest.

More suitable to small cities than “place marketing”, says Gordon Waitt, is a “place-making” focus on “sustaining the everyday lives of residents.” This approach emphasizes “public consultation, the transfer of skills and knowledge and social justice issues of belonging, including sense of community and sense of place” (180). Above all, researchers agree about cities of all sizes that cultural change emerges *from* urban life, rather than being imposed upon it from above. (Evans and Foord, 152). Thus, the onus is on governments and public services to consult with citizens, and individual citizens and organizations to consult with and collaborate with one another in their ongoing quest to enhance the quality of life in their communities.

Theatres in small cities have an important role to play in building community and as models for performance in other communities. Bell and Jayne remind us that small cities are “important nodes in the networks between places of different scales, and they are seen to mediate between the rural and the urban, the centre and the suburb as well as between the local and the global” (“Small Cities?” 691). While the system each of the three companies in our study follows is, as James Hoffman indicates in his article “The ABC’s of Community Engagement” herein, imported, it is also one that they are continually reconfiguring to the specific needs of their respective communities. As they continue their work on community vitality, we remind them that they are not alone: 40-45% of the world’s urban dwellers live in centres with a population of less than 100,000 (Small Cities?” 689). Small city professional companies have much to learn from – and teach – others.

The fundamental questions which TheatreOne, Theatre North West, and Western Canada Theatre ask themselves are, thus, questions likely to have applicability well beyond the three companies. What can professional companies do to foster the well being of greater segments of the community of which they are a part? This question might constructively be bifurcated into how individuals and groups can be encouraged to theatre and how companies can approach potential audiences. As our surveys of both infrequent attendees and of best practices indicate, the larger question generates several other questions, such as:

- What is our role in the place-making of our small city?
- What specific segments of our community could most benefit from our collaboration?
- What role can we have in creating and fostering collaborations (within and beyond the arts) that can stimulate positive change?
- What practices can we engage in that will be inclusive of diverse groups?
- How can we best work with marginalized segments of our community?
- What more can be done to foster the education and engagement of youth?

Engaging new audiences is an ongoing pursuit for arts organizations. Dance/USA concludes its study with some working definitions of audience engagement, gleaned from their interviews, which emphasize interactivity and holistic involvement, and encourage companies to experiment. Audience engagement “builds connections among prospective audiences” by being “actively two-way rather than presentational” and its outcomes “are not attendance or ticket sales alone, but impacts.” “Innovation, risk, and investment” are necessary if companies wish to re-define their role in the community (10). These

perspectives from company personnel evince a sophisticated understanding of the considerable potential of their impact in their communities.

Likewise, small-city Canadian citizens place high value and high expectations on their professional theatre companies, believing they have an important role to play in “preparing more activities for people to participate in and enjoy” and creating “community and culture.” As one newcomer to Kamloops commented on our survey, “I’ve not gone yet but I’m so excited to go. I love live theatre. It breaks down barriers between humans.” As companies work to expand their roles in their respective communities, they might well consider the words of Vancouver playwright John Gray:

We are all works of art, cultural creations. We need to pay attention – to each other, to the world we are in the process of creating, to the culture that surrounds us and draws us imaginatively together, that can give us the spiritual strength to face a world of shifting borders and changing times. (190)

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