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# INCREMENTAL SOCIAL CHANGE: ENHANCING PARTICIPANT WELL-BEING

All art of every sort changes the world. Perhaps an artist aims at less direct, precise, or immediate an effect than a president or legislator or general or banker or activist will have; but more effect, more potency, more agency than the ordinary is inevitably an artist's aspiration...Art is not merely contemplation, it is also action, and all action changes the world, at least a little.

-Tony Kushner

On a hot, hazy September afternoon, I attended a protest rally – a form of cultural performance – in Kamloops. Although the cause of the rally was unrelated to theatre, the proposed action being protested would have consequences community wide, and Western Canada Theatre is very much a part of the Kamloops community. As I reflect on the protest, I am struck by certain similarities between the staging of a protest and the staging of a play in a community: both are dependent on publicity, both require expert production, and both can have profound effects on participants and audiences.

Like all effective protests, this one was well publicized. Its leaders made use of both traditional (newspaper) and new (Internet) media to get the word out. I learned of it through a newspaper article, an email from one of the organizers, a further email from the chairperson of an organization to which I belong, and a third email on the Thompson Rivers University faculty list. The leaders certainly succeeded in getting the word out, which was especially impressive because they had only a few days to do so.

The event itself was also well orchestrated. The pre-show, that informal period when people gather, saw the crowd of approximately 100 protesters milling pleasantly outside the doors of Kamloops City Hall for just about the right amount of time to connect with like-minded citizens and socialize, but not so much time as to become restless. The show began when the organizers roused us with a song in which virtually all of us eventually participated. The sequencing of the speeches was well thought out: three of the local faces most associated with the cause gave quick, rousing welcomes and a fourth, also a well-known local activist, followed up with a more sustained talk that appealed, first, to the crowds' emotions such as sympathy and empathy, and then to their logic as she outlined the reasons for her concern and a proposed course of action. The culminating speaker, a visiting academic, evinced knowledge of the culture of the local community, presented a speech that was both effective and affecting, and induced yet another few rounds of song in the crowd. The seasoned organizers had ensured that local media were out in full force. Post-show, several leaders and protesters were interviewed, cameras were at the ready, and most of us did a bit of winding down together before going our separate ways. A few of my fellow protesters and I, still exhilarated by the event, watched the local television news coverage together just a few hours later,

and read an account of the event in the next morning's *Kamloops Daily News*.

The organizers were also impressive in their follow up to the event, reporting via email the same evening, and informing us of a “victory dance” to be held at a later date. As it turned out, the dance was a rousing success: local bands stimulated even the most reluctant of us to celebrate our activism, and funds were generated for further community work. Both the protest and the dance left us, the participants, feeling empowered as citizens.

Richard Schechner, drawing on the work on Victor Turner, might describe our experience as a “liminoid” one: a voluntary symbolic action that functions in contemporary society similarly to how rituals functioned in traditional societies (61). Schechner describes such rituals as “effect[ing] a temporary change ....These are transportations....One enters into the experience is “moved” or “touched” (apt metaphors) and is then dropped off about where she or he entered” (63). From all indications, the pleasure experienced by those who participated in this protest is not an anomaly. Many studies among them one performed by Malte Klar and Tim Klasser and entitled “Some Benefits of Being an Activist: Measuring Activism and Its Role in Psychological Well-Being,” indicate that even a single activist performance has a positive effect on individuals. Specifically, Klar and Klasser conclude, “Activism is associated not only with subjective well-being, but also with eudaimonic and social well-being” (). The researchers describe subjective well-being as “life satisfaction and positive affect” eudaimonic well-being as “personal growth, purpose in life, vitality” and social well-being as “social integration.”

From the political rally, we can, I assert, learn about the experience of theatre. The application of the theatre trope to this event is evident on several levels. First, as I have indicated, the theatricality of it is apparent: clearly, the organizers did much to stage the event. They were producers, but also actors and directors: they organized, controlled the timing, led the crowd, and participated in the event. But I and my fellow protestors were more than audience: while we listened to their speeches, we also sang, took direction from the organizers, danced, and in other ways participated. In this theatrical event, the lines that separate producers, participants, and audience were somewhat blurred.

The parallel between the public protest and the theatrical event that struck me most profoundly, however, is both personal and social. The well-being I experienced from my activism is strikingly similar to the feeling I experience after some of my best encounters with local theatre. A large measure of the well being in both cases is what Klar and Klasser term “social integration.” My fellow protesters and I had in common a cause: we shared a belief. As well, part of the exhilaration was because I was familiar with many people at the protest—both the organizers and my fellow participants. In a crowd of strangers, satisfaction with the events would still have been present, but it was enhanced by the ease of socializing with familiar people. So, too, is the experience of theatregoing enhanced by familiarity. One is likely to attend a play with others, one may or may not know other audience members, and one may or may not have a personal familiarity with some members of the theatre company. Satisfaction with, even exhilaration over, a play is not dependent on these acquaintanceships, but one is likely to become more involved in what one has an investment in – emotional, intellectual, or otherwise. And small cities – for theatregoers as well as activists – are especially fertile ground for such relationships, precisely because of the opportunities for repeated connections with others.

Jill Dolan, in *Utopia in Performance*, describes the transformative (Schechner might call them “transportative”) possibilities of theatre:

Live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world. (2),

small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. (5)

That elevation above the ordinary can occur when, for example, the script and the actor come together with the moment and transfix. It can also happen, as I have experienced it, when one has a flash of, not only the theatrical moment, but also of the sheer volume of process that is involved in the production of that moment. It can happen when one experiences with one's fellow audience members and the actors the sheer joy of the art of acting. It is not only the excitement of live performance, but also – as with activism – the excitement of *communal* liveness. In fact, studies such as Ostrower's *The Diversity of Cultural Participation* find that what most attracts people to theatre is socializing with friends and family, followed closely by the desire for a satisfying emotional experience, and our study of Kamloops audiences, "Constructing Meaning: An Audience Interprets Western Canada Theatre," supports those findings. It appears the tripartite effect that activism can engender – subjective, eudaimonic, and social well being – is also sought, and sometimes found, by theatregoers.

Perhaps it is telling of our times that the attendees' deepest satisfaction depends upon the presence of a group. Australian theatre scholar Michael Balfour notes "an ideological shift from community to a culture of the individual" in Australia and the United Kingdom since the 1980s (349). I suggest that Canadians have experienced something similar. Vancouver's Headlines Theatre Director David Diamond goes so far as to assert, "Communities have become fragmented into individualized consumers and have lost their ability to collectively tell their stories" (19). As politics, the economy, and technology often mitigate against traditional concepts of community, the roles of community activism and artistic culture in promoting social interaction become increasingly significant.

At first blush, theatre would seem a particularly well-suited art form for not only social interaction, but also social action: it a public, communal gathering to witness a live performance. Belfiore and Bennett, in their examination of the social impact of all the arts, contend, "Whilst works of art can be seen, in certain circumstances, as agents of social and political change, certain art forms are more prone to achieving these ends than others, the theatre having an obvious advantage over other, more private, aesthetic concerns" (163). In a way unlike the painting or the novel, for example, the public, communal play can catalyze an audience.

Belfiore and Bennett may not be fully considering the *system* under which most theatre operates. As Pierre Bourdieu maintains,

Because they are based on a relation to culture which is necessarily also a relation to the 'economy' and the market, institutions producing and marketing cultural goods, whether in painting, literature, theatre or cinema, tend to be organized into structurally and functionally homologous systems which also stand in a relation of structural homology with the field of the fractions of the dominant class (from which the greater part of their clientele is drawn). This homology is most evident in the case of the theatre (84).

Thus, untethered, theatre has the most potential for social change. At the same time, it is the most hampered by the bureaucracy inherent in capitalism. The system undermines the form.

Nonetheless, despite the limitations of the systems under which most theatres operate, as Dolan says, documenting the emotional effects of theatre is “a way to think about its social potential” (15). Although the joy a play can provide is in itself to be treasured, it can also be an impetus to reflections and even to action. Dolan continues, “ Utopian performatives exceed the content of a play or performance... [they] spring from a complex alchemy of form and content, context and location, which take shape in moments of utopia as doings, as process, as never finished gestures toward a potentially better future” (8). I would like to extend Dolan’s assertion further – to argue that theatre’s transformative effects on audiences are not limited to performances themselves. That is, audiences’ involvement in theatre – be it amateur or professional theatre – can transcend attending performances; attendance can be augmented by a variety of additional activities that more fully engage audiences. As Susan Bennett notes, a ticket “promises the audience two performances: one is the show itself and the other is the experience of being in a theatre” (118). Furthermore, Ostrower’s extensive audience surveys indicate that the majority of theatregoers are more likely to return to a venue whose last production they didn’t like than to a venue they didn’t like. This is why such large studies on the impact of the arts as *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts* focus on the *experience* rather than the work of art (4). The work of art is the core, of course, but from it emanates the larger experience.

Elsewhere in this issue of *The Small Cities Imprint*, James Hoffman presents examples of full-blown community – engaged theatre companies such as Newfoundland’s Rising Tide Theatre, with its ongoing commitment to staging locally-inflected work, and Headlines Theatre, which is committed to “issues-oriented theatre.” Both companies are outstanding illustrations of the lengths to which theatre can go to engage communities as direct participants in the process and production of plays. I propose to complement Hoffman’s article by examining the scholarly literature and surveying the best practices of a variety of professional companies (with an emphasis on small-city praxis), including the three in our study, which are closer to the mainstream of contemporary Canadian theatre: furthermore I will augment that study slightly by glancing at select practices in other arts. In keeping with our focus on quality of life, I will stress that these practices are best appraised, not by their effect on ticket sales, but by their potential impact – an admittedly more abstract concept.

My central question is “What are the practices and possibilities for professional companies working within similar structures to deeply engage with their existing audiences and thereby foster tri-fold well being?” I believe they are substantial. While my survey is by no means exhaustive or definitive, it reviews some of the conventional approaches to engaging and expanding theatre audiences with an eye to the potentials within them. The examples included herein not only expose companies in the three small cities in our study to best practices of other companies, but also remind them of what they themselves have done successfully *and* inform them of each other’s theatre culture. Companies are often so active in creation that opportunities to reflect upon their own previous practices, never mind consider those of others, are rare. This chapter does not advocate for a template of standardization; on the contrary, it encourages diversity of practice based on what best meets individual audience needs. What works for one will not likely work for all, but perhaps examples of what works for one will stimulate thought and adaptation that will suit the individual culture of another.

Frequent attendees, particularly subscribers, are, of course, the theatre companies’ backbone. If, as multiple studies, including Bennett’s, indicate, the habit of attending a venue is strong, then this is, at a glance, a pretty “safe” audience. However, if a theatre company is committed to its audience and its community, it would be folly to rest on its laurels, particularly as other opportunities for public and private engagement proliferate – as theatre professionals know, and as is indicated by their constant innovation. For example, TheatreOne’s commitment to “enhancing the quality of life in Nanaimo by encouraging social interaction and by developing Nanaimo’s culture” reflects an awareness of the importance of the total experience of theatre. As our own study indicates, as I conclude in “Constructing Meaning: An

Audience Interprets Western Canada Theatre” regular attendees can have a great deal of satisfaction with their local company while still desiring more involvement with the company and their fellow theatre goers (*Cue*, 28).

Some common methods of enhancing engagement require audience awareness and initiative, as well as sustained commitment. For example, as a member of the Board of Directors, an individual may have financial or organizing expertise to offer. Application of that expertise could then lead to acquaintance with company personnel as well as to a substantially enhanced understanding of the material conditions of professional theatre. As WCT board member Coby Fulton reports, “Being a board member definitely helps you feel like you are a part of the theatre family....Knowing about the staff and intimately knowing the issues facing the theatre company is critical to providing effective leadership....I feel a lot of pride in being part of the company’s success and a sense of commitment to the mission of the organization that I likely wouldn’t feel just as a patron” (Fulton). Fulton also engages with various company personnel through the different committees he sits on, and has a “behind-the-scenes” sense of the considerable work involved in production. Conventional volunteering, of course, can also enhance involvement. Ushering, for example (as well as affording the volunteer, and sometimes a guest, multiple opportunities to see a play in various stages of production without cost, as is the case at Western Canada Theatre) affords the participant increased contact with both audience members and select theatre staff. One of 300 volunteers at the company, long-time usher Anne Grube, who fondly remembers her childhood experiences with local theatre, including attending plays by the youth company from which WCT emerged, began this form of volunteering with WCT when her children were younger in order, in part, to make the theatre experience more affordable for the four of them. All three children performed in plays while at high school and continue to attend performances as adults, and one has been involved in a locally-written musical for a nearby community theatre group. Grube continued ushering because of a sense of responsibility to her community. Lending one’s expertise to boards of directors and ushering as well as to “painting sets and scenery, sewing costumes, working with lights, and building props and sets” (as Western Canada Theatre’s website invites readers to do) is very likely to lead to considerably greater familiarity with some staff members and augment the participants’ sense of connection to and appreciation for the process of production, thereby enhancing their well being. Volunteer Canada puts this experience into a larger context: “Volunteering is the most fundamental act of citizenship and philanthropy in our society.... People work to improve the lives of their neighbours and, in return, enhance their own.” Commitment translates into enrichment.

Companies have the responsibility to make their communities aware of the volunteer opportunities available, to make volunteering appealing and easy for the newcomer to initiate, and to consider expanding those opportunities. For example, Western Canada Theatre’s website informs readers of both ushering and backstage opportunities, provides email and phone contact numbers for each, and, for even greater ease of access, provides a downloadable registration form. Even regular attendees may be surprised at the volunteer possibilities beyond the conventional three roles of board member, usher, and backstage volunteer. The website of Ottawa’s A Company of Fools Theatre Inc., for example, appeals for assistance facilitating events, administering the website, and preparing and distributing publicity material, and Theatre North West’s website invites volunteers to assist with annual special events; these companies are providing an opportunity for those who may not see themselves as having theatrical skills to accompany their theatrical interest or may not be able to commit to regular, ongoing volunteer positions to enhance their sense of belonging to the companies in their communities. While professional theatres may face some restrictions on what tasks can be filled by non-paid workers, creative ways of involving their communities are possible, and informing them of the varied skills that the company requires is an important initial step. Some less obvious initiatives are especially suited to small cities. For example, Theatre North West’s “Host an Actor” program, advertised on its website, both plays a role in the facilitation of the company’s ability to attract actors from outside of the region and, according to the company’s former artistic director, enhances

hosts' connections to the company. Each volunteer contribution is rewarding in distinct ways, yet each is very likely to lead the participant to a greater sense of connection to the company, even to a sense of ownership and involvement, with the likely result that the participant will find her/himself viewing plays – and companies – from a more appreciative and complex perspective. Fulton, for example, though he emphasizes that he does not have an influence on artistic production decisions, evinces a clear sense of belonging and states satisfaction at having “contributed to the success of these productions.”

In addition to publicizing and diversifying the possibilities for volunteerism as a means to foster enhanced engagement, mainstream professional theatre companies can generate a variety of activities that require less of a sustained commitment from an individual. These events may precede or follow a play itself – such as opening night socials and talkback sessions – or they may be designed to engage the audience in the company's activities more generally – such as special events that run the gamut from auctions to movie nights. Each promotes well being through socializing in a variety of forums.

Opening night celebrations afford multiple opportunities to promote well-being. They tend to attract regular theatregoers – subscribers who elect to attend that particular night at least in part because it *is* opening night – as well as those, such as sponsors, who might be receiving complimentary tickets for that the performance. “Regulars” can, thus, socialize with each other and non-regular attendees, as well as have an opportunity to connect with cast members and theatre personnel. Western Canada Theatre, over the course of its history, has practised both formal and informal models of opening night socials: a brief speech by the artistic director, who introduced the cast and crew, and a completely open, no-speech approach. In either case, food and drink do much to support conviviality. The opening night social is likely to be scheduled – as is the case with Western Canada Theatre – on a weekend, rather than the actual first night of performance, in order to maximize its effect. Theatre North West's opening night socials are also informal wine-and-cheese affairs, with often as many as half of the audience members, including proud hosts who are billeting out-of-town professionals, staying after the show. Ted Price sees the primary purpose of the social as to promote social interaction among theatregoers, rather than staging it as an organizational function. Other purposes of the opening night event in general are to celebrate a particular production, provide an opportunity for playgoers to offer their feedback, and, presumably, generate word-of-mouth affirmation for subsequent performances—all of which can enhance a sense of connection.

Lobby events are a further recognition that the theatre experience goes beyond the play. The traditional lobby display of photos of playwright, actors, and others involved in a specific production generates interest and conversation; perhaps the television screens which have replaced them (and which have the possibility of attracting other arts organizations as advertisers) at WCT will prove equally effective. Theatre Northwest has taken physical lobby displays a step further with displays of articles and visuals related to each production. For example, for TNW's production of *The Miracle Worker*, historical shots of previous stage and film productions enhanced the experience, and for *Hockey Mom*, *Hockey Dad*, a play on hockey violence, enlarged newspaper and magazine articles on the nature of violence in hockey, along with articles on parental obsession with their children's sports activities, augmented the production and were widely read. The company also raffles art work and other objects in the lobby during intermission. Taking advantage of the pre and post-show spots, as well as the intermission, Western Canada Theatre often offers silent auctions which, in addition to raising funds and providing goods, are an opportunity for theatregoers to interact with one another and WCT staff. The company has also recognized interactive potential in lobby displays; for example, for its 2010 production of Norm Foster's *The Foursome*, WCT partnered with a local golf resort to produce a golf-themed lobby display that included a hands-on activity – putting for prizes. Furthermore, the Sagebrush Theatre, one of two WCT venues, also displays exhibitions of local art; the occasional art exhibitions connected to a particular performance can be especially effective at fostering community partnerships and intensifying the experience. In the spring of 2009, CURA

Research Assistants Erin Hoyt and Melanie Bilodeau, under the supervision of James Hoffman, mounted a display of historical photographs and other archival material in conjunction with the WCT production of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* that proved so successful that it travelled to Ottawa's National Arts Centre with the play. Western Canada Theatre was also accommodating of our more interactive use of the lobbies at their two venues for our CURA studies when we employed flip charts to gauge audience response and create a "public" survey in which playgoers could build on each other's comments on individual works or the general experience of theatre. I have often wondered, in this context and others, about the apparent disappearance of the old-fashioned suggestion box, which had the advantage of anonymity and ease of maintenance, and guest books, which are frequently used as interactive and evaluative tools at art galleries. Electronic guest books, suggestion boxes, and surveys, which have the advantage of immediacy, might be considered. The lobby has multiple possibilities to foster enhanced engagement.

Theatre companies are increasingly aware of the potential of talkback sessions to foster audience well being: companies provide insight into the process of production and theatregoers have the opportunity to offer feedback. In an echo of Dolan's concept of utopia, communications scholar Janna Goodwin summarizes the potential well:

Audience is where the action is, and in a productive postshow one can observe and contribute to the public formulation of positions and relationships, and their transformation. In a productive postshow, audiences talk back, talk to each other, and (with good facilitation) also listen to one another, making sense together of common experience in the advantageously liminoid atmosphere that lingers following a powerful performance (317).

The type of performance, the make-up of a particular audience, and the culture of a particular community are all factors for consideration in the planning of the talkback event. In fact, companies initiating talkback sessions may discover that generating an audience for them is a skill in itself: it may take time to re-educate an audience to stay for the postshow; sustained commitment to advertising and promoting the feature, with clear indications of the nature of the audience involvement, is a likely requirement in order for the talkback to become an ongoing feature. While actors and directors are generally present, other theatre practitioners may be involved, as participants may have as much interest in, for example, the set construction, as in the response of the actors. Physical location – be it the theatre lobby, the theatre proper, the stage itself, or the green room – can affect the sense of engagement audience members feel. Even such a simple stimulus as Western Canada Theatre's recent invitation to audience members to examine the set of their production of Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* is an important step in encouraging nightly audiences to think in terms of post-show. Behind-the-scenes experiences can take many forms.

The traditional talkback form is also being transformed, in various ways, to suit audiences' schedules and increasing appetite for interactivity. Indeed, companies may, as Vancouver's Firehall Theatre has done, schedule interactive sessions as pre-show events. These would obviously have a different function, such as preparing audiences for an especially emotionally challenging production, but might well draw attendance and augment engagement, as suggested by Calgary's Alberta Theatre Projects' "Pizza with Vee" described as "an informal pre-show evening" for the audience to join the artistic director and a special guest for "free pizza and engaging dialogue." Some theatres offer opportunities for both pre- and post-show talkback formats, turning them into events that go further than conventional approaches to engender social engagement and educational opportunities. Most notably, Victoria's Belfry, while it does offer some postshow opportunities, has offered several themed pre-show opportunities, such as "Sunday Coffee Talk" and Wednesday "High Tea". The Belfry's "Re-Actor" series also expands the talkback session into an entire evening of engagement, inviting audiences to fraternize with Canadian theatre artists, learn about such aspects as auditioning tips and the use of new media in theatre, and "expand [their]

social networks.” This approach may be attractive to those who appreciate time for reflection and wish to compare notes with others who have seen the play at another time, as well as expand their knowledge of theatre craft. The varying approaches in these examples illustrate companies’ awareness of how best to meet their respective audiences’ taste for interactivity.

Evolutions in talkback style are also occurring. Based on her extensive experience with community-engaged theatre, Anne Ellis suggests it might be fruitful to frame talkback events more as “community conversations” than question-and-answer sessions, shifting the traditional focus from an appreciation of theatrical prowess to “the potential for communities to express their own anxieties and hopes” (92). While her experience is largely with alternative theatre in the US, her suggestions may well have application to more mainstream venues elsewhere. Ellis proposes “an egalitarian commitment to process” with the setting the performance space itself, the time immediately subsequent to the performance, and the emphasis on inclusivity, open dialogue (with a de-emphasis on the role of expert), soliciting audience stories, and encouraging audience-to-audience dialogue. Similarly, Goodwin recommends facilitators ask questions of the audience, not to the exclusion of audience-generated questions, of course, but as a means of shifting the focus from the theatre to increasing the audience’s self awareness. (318).

Increasingly, dance, community-based theatre, and even more mainstream theatre companies are soliciting audience feedback *before* a play is staged. A survey of twenty-five American dance companies found that open rehearsals and “informal showings that give people the opportunity to see works in progress and comment on them” are being practiced (“Audience Engagement” 4). Ellis provides successful examples, notably Roadside Theater of New York State, of conversations occurring while a community play is in development, (97), and Toronto’s Theatre Passe Muraille (TPM) has instituted BUZZ, an initiative also designed to receive audience feedback about works still in development. This level of input would be most applicable to a new play, but could also prove beneficial for all parties in other circumstances. As well as providing useful feedback to the company, it would certainly promote a sense of ownership in the audience. TPM artistic director Andy McKim likens participating in BUZZ to watching a baseball game: “The more the audience understands about all of the players, their objectives, their skills and strengths and abilities, where their heart and mind is, the more they are connected to that and engaged with it” (16).

Outside of the show experience itself, an entrenched feature of most professional theatres in Canada is the special event, whose purposes are likely to be manifold: responding to a community need, raising funds, showing appreciation to and enhancing the engagement of existing audiences, and attracting new attendees. The special event is likely “regular” whether it be annual or more frequent, and is very much individual to a community; it runs the gamut from culinary to sport to cinematic.

Food and wine events are mainstays, but at the same time heterogeneous – tailored to the interests of specific communities. For example, Theatre North West’s late fall International Wine Festival is a popular community event – it usually sells out, in fact – and so successful that a select number of tickets is put on silent auction at various restaurants throughout Prince George. The event, thus, not only provides a celebratory “night out” but also involves various businesses in assorted ways. TheatreOne’s annual traditional special event also frequently sells out; each fall, The Bite of Nanaimo, which the company acknowledges as its biggest fundraiser, showcases the cuisine of local restaurants, with trophies awarded in several categories. Perhaps as evidence of both its ethnically diverse audience and its rootedness in its neighbourhood as well as a desire to foster transculturalism and attract non attendees, Vancouver’s Firehall Theatre has hosted such “food events” as a combined celebration of Chinese New Year and Robbie Burns Day at a local restaurant. Western Canada Theatre’s spring Auction of Experiences was a tradition for several decades: attendees enjoyed an evening of wining and dining and socializing complete with both a silent and a conventional auction of goods and experiences – everything from works by local artists to sports weekends. Such events afford opportunities for companies to show appreciation to supporters



and to enhance their relationships with a wide variety of community donors. Each of these examples illustrates their respective company's sustained understanding of their individual community's culture of celebration.

Ongoing special events can also be responsive by filling a cultural gap or capitalizing on activities popular within a particular community. A sustained example of TheatreOne's use of special events to involve the community is their series "Fringe Flicks" which begins in fall and extends to early spring. The continued popularity of the series (it has been running for over a decade) suggests it has filled an important cultural gap in the Nanaimo area by affording the community the opportunity to experience alternative cinema. In an apparently less likely crossover, Theatre Calgary's "The Big Run" is a half-marathon in support of the company's Student Education Series, encouraging theatre goers to be participants and non-attendees to support the company. These imaginative examples, which cross arts and arts-sport boundaries, reflect their companies' acknowledgement of the diverse needs and interests of their communities.

Closer to the theatre experience itself, and, thus, perhaps most likely to foster the triple well being of which Klar and Klasser write, are the special events which offer a hands-on, insider experience for those in attendance, while smudging the lines between company and audience. Newfoundland's Stephenville Theatre Festival's both takes advantage of a popular theatrical event, targets a specific component of its audience, and invites participation from its audience with its "Martinis and Monologues" which offers female members of its audience the option of performing (in such works as *The Vagina Monologues*) in a fun, non-threatening, informal atmosphere. Such a circumstance allows the thespian lurking in many theatregoers to emerge at little risk, while encouraging those more comfortable remaining as audience to support their friends. In a small-city, scaled-down adaptation of "Long Night of Museums" which began in Berlin, Germany and has spread to well over 100 cities across the globe (and which I discuss at greater length elsewhere in this issue) Regina's Globe Theatre has featured a "Doors Open Day" complete with backstage tours and participatory activities – an invitation that can have significant impact on the engagement of existing audiences. Such approaches can provide potent stimulation of the participatory urges of those already awakened to the role theatre plays in their tri-fold well being.

While it might be tempting to call for a quantitative analysis of the practices explored above, more productive is, I assert, the simple outlining of the array of practices to the end of encouraging reflection. Communities, while sharing a variety of commonalities, are also distinct entities; locally imbedded or inflected strategies are most likely to succeed. Furthermore, quality is at the root of our exploration in our CURA research, and quality is more precious and, thus, more difficult to measure. As Mark Seasons states in a CURA roundtable on quality of life, we need to "interpret quality of life less in material terms, more in experiential terms" (158).

In addition, it might be productive to highlight certain questions for consideration. Professional theatre companies are always in the process of asking important questions such as these:

What does our audience want from the total theatre experience?

How can we augment the performance?

What processes might interest our audience?

How can we engender further participatory involvement?

The answers to these questions involve theatre companies in constant change that is usually small but often significant; there is much to be said for incremental modifications, not only for practical (economic and staffing) reasons, but also in terms of audience adjustment. Particularly in a political climate in which budget cuts to the arts are a constant concern, companies may be anxious about making change, yet it is in just such a climate that experimentation can flourish. The historical ability of Western Canada Theatre, Theatre North West, and TheatreOne to think creatively and to overcome logistical,

financial, and personnel adversities is documented elsewhere in this issue.

Responses to the questions will necessarily differ from community to community, as they must be homegrown, but companies in small cities, in particular, have the capability of having closer, more sustained relationships with, and thus better fostering the well being of, their audiences. I am struck by how often the word “sustain” or some variation of it has crept into this article, and how often I use the word to mean ongoing and protracted. This suggests companies give new practices a fair run when they are implemented, perhaps varying and tweaking them as they go, and always gauging audience response to and encouraging audience input into new and adapted practices – through both formal and informal means such as on and off-site surveys, focus groups, interactive websites, and old-fashioned conversations. Of course, sustainable practices also nourish and assist, as well as making use of resources while maintaining an environment’s ecological balance; the answers to these questions can support those meanings of the word. Acting upon the responses to these questions can also be “never finished gestures toward a potentially better future” (Dolan 8).

The protest on which I began this chapter has become merely the first stage in a series of activities. Since the November dance as many as 1,000 Kamloopsians have participated in a series of related events, including a march, two more rallies, and three educational forums. The first march was organized, not by seasoned veterans, but by students, who made extensive use of social media as well as old-fashioned populist approaches to publicity such as notices on car windshields and posters on light standards. The march and rallies also incorporated such street theatre as costumes, chanting, singing, placards, and symbolic props. Not only have the lines between theatre and activism become increasingly blurred; so, too, are the lines between audience and participant becoming incrementally indistinct. “Open mics” have proven popular, as individuals tell their stories, some first-time protest participants have progressed to the point of making formal speeches to share their knowledge with their fellow activists, and letter-writing, phone-calling, and emailing campaigns abound. The original organizers are still working diligently on the cause, and seeking frequent feedback, but they seem to be taking increasingly “behind the scenes” roles, as the spotlight shifts not only to acknowledged local experts on the subject of the protest, but also to concerned citizens. At the moment of writing a prediction about our success in our main goal would be premature. What is clear, though, and perhaps as significant as the outcome of our actions, is that our engagement is fostering our individual and collective well being. In Schechner’s reading of Turner, at least some of us may be moving from being transported – a temporary, liminoid situation – to being transformed—a liminal situation in which we are permanently changed (63). Liminal states “can be among the most powerful experiences life has to offer. While in a liminal state, people are freed from the demands of daily life. They feel at one with their comrades, all personal and social differences erased. People are uplifted, swept away, taken over” (62).

Enhancing audience well being can be a profound method of social change. As Dance/USA reports, “some practitioners in the field see audience engagement as blurring the line with the art-making itself.” Allan Gregg encourages a view of culture “from the perspective of the galvanizing effect it can have on our sense of shared experience” and maintains it “has the properties required to be the glue that brings citizens together, and bonds them into a sense of community” (Gregg 79). The vocation of the activist, according to Claire Peeps, is “largely the building of social capital – the grassroots networks that enable people to move information and ideas to a broader audience, and ultimately to make change happen.” As Jan Cohen Cruz sees it, the vocation of the community artist “entails the actual shaping of information and ideas, images and feelings, for and with a known audience. In some cases, the two realms intersect smoothly”(3). Like activism, theatre can be a potent platform for social change, and, as our local protest would seem to indicate, the initial stimulus provided by “leaders” can gradually – incrementally – be augmented by grassroots involvement to the extent that barriers dissolve, participants are empowered, and well being is augmented. Indeed, if, as thinkers such as John Ralston Saul indicate,

Canadians are increasingly alienated from their political and corporate elites, then local activism and cultural participation may have profound roles in our lives as citizens (318). As M. Sharon Jeannotte states, “Cultural citizenship, in an increasingly diverse and globalized environment, may in fact be one of the most effective mechanisms for states wishing to strengthen their democratic foundations. Citizens live their lives in communities not only through rights and duties, but also through imagination and creativity” (141).

As a group, small city professional theatre companies in Canada have distinct challenges and opportunities to strengthen cultural citizenship and individual well being. Individually and collectively, the companies in the study James Hoffman and I completed as collaborators in the Thompson Rivers University Community-University Research Alliance’s “Mapping Quality of Life & the Culture of Small Cities” have inspired us with their commitment to both art and audience. It is our hope that Western Canada Theatre, Theatre One, and Theatre North West find some inspiration in this issue of *The Small Cities Imprint* to continue and expand that commitment.

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