

**ON THE BRINK: THEATRES SEARCH FOR A
POST-PANDEMIC MODEL**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the ways in which the leaders responsible for nonprofit theatres behave in moments of crisis, focusing on the response to the events of 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic and a social justice movement kicked into high gear by Black Lives Matter.

Theatres had been struggling to change in the years leading up to the crisis, with a shrinking subscriber base, increasing competition with digital forms of entertainment, and diminishing relevance with younger and diverse audience members. In spite of an articulated desire to practice Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), many theatres remained resolutely white on their stages, in their administrations and board rooms.

My research examines the immediate response to the crises and the actions undertaken in the three subsequent years, based on semi-structured interviews with the leadership of fifteen theatres across Canada. Conducted three years after the beginning of the pandemic, the interviews gave the artistic directors, executive directors, and chairs of the boards the opportunity to reflect on policy and practice changes made and how they perceived their success.

While every theatre responded to the turmoil of 2020 by undertaking actions to address inequity, lack of diversity, exclusion, health and wellness, and work-life balance, by the time of the interviews, other factors were affecting the success of those initiatives: audiences were not returning to theatres, the cost of living was increasing, public funding was decreasing, and the public's attention was on global concerns like climate change and war.

I contend, based on the data compiled, that a governance model that was already flawed proved incapable of meeting the challenges of a crisis that was essentially existential in nature. Boards of directors are most prepared to deal with financial crises, but the larger crisis of 2020 exposed and exacerbated the systemic problems that already existed. Further, a failure to address the systemic issues means that changes made during the pandemic are failing, or being abandoned. Finally, I argue that that the systemic problems of the model are jeopardizing the survival of theatres.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2020, two events changed the world: the COVID-19 pandemic sent country after country into lockdown, and the murder of George Floyd, videotaped and broadcast around the globe, galvanized a movement demanding racial equity. That much of the world was housebound and following news online, combined with the ubiquity of the coverage of the response to George Floyd's murder, meant the movement did not disappear in the news cycle. Instead, the demands for equity grew, and rippled outward. The Black Lives Matter movement challenged every sector of society to stand in solidarity with Black people, to state their allyship, and to prove it in action. Governments, businesses, banks, and media all rushed to agree that "Black lives matter," posting messages of solidarity on their social media and participating in actions like the Black Square. Yet it did not take long for them to be called out for their hypocrisy, with critics pointing to the obvious absence of non-White faces in their upper echelons and board rooms.

Arts organisations were no less susceptible to this scrutiny. Theatre after theatre was called out for talking the Black Lives Matter talk, but not walking the walk. In June 2020, in the United States, an open letter called "We See You, White American Theater" was initially signed by 300 BIPOC theatre artists (joined by 100,000 more online signatures). This letter enumerated all the ways in which theatres were perpetuating racism, and the group followed up a month later with a 29-page list of demands intended to drive American theatre towards anti-racist operations. In Canada, artistic directors whose theatres were felt to be paying lip service to allyship were challenged by BIPOC artists, resulting in a number of them resigning or announcing their retirements, or being dismissed.

Theatres had already been grappling with a changing world when the pandemic shuttered them. The subscription base that had for decades provided a financial cushion for theatres had been shrinking as patrons' entertainment options expanded, and younger potential audience members from a diversity of communities who did not see themselves represented in the traditional fare offered onstage did not buy tickets, much less subscribe. Closing the theatres meant the immediate loss of ticket sales, negotiating a refund policy with subscribers who were still owed a

show or two in the season, the challenge of how and whether to pay for staff who were not coming in to work, and the necessity of maintaining facilities that stood empty and were not generating revenue. Three months into this crisis, the racial reckoning began, complicating the imagined reopening of the theatres. Suddenly, boards of directors who were responsible for their governance were being held accountable for the Whiteness of their stages, their staff, and their own board recruitment strategies. As theatres tried to imagine reopening, they were also being asked to demonstrate a commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion.

Of course, theatres periodically go through crises which necessitate the increased involvement of the board of directors. Most often these crises are financial in nature: budget shortfalls, unexpected expenses leading to deficits, financial mismanagement, and fraud. Occasionally, the departure of a leader or leaders will precipitate a crisis. In most cases, at least one member of the board can be expected to have had some prior experience with this type of crisis. These sorts of crises were most often moments that needed to be addressed quickly and decisively. However, in the reckoning that was precipitated by the Black Lives Matter movement, theatres faced a new and unrecognizable crisis, a crisis of exclusion/inclusion. Though there have been calls for equity in previous decades, from the civil rights movement and the feminist movements of the 1950s and 1960s, through to the #metoo movement of the 2000s, very few boards of directors had faced this kind of crisis, one that was both ideological and sustained.

As a result of this crisis, in the three years that have passed since the beginning of the pandemic, many theatres have undertaken Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives that attempt to address systemic inequities. As theatres began to re-open a year into the pandemic, communities who had called out the whiteness of their theatres watched to see if those initiatives had made any substantive difference. In many ways, the crisis of 2020 continues, and requires not a single solution but a radical rethinking of the structure of the theatre.

1.1 Organisation of the Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the ways in which the leaders responsible for theatres behave in moments of crisis, focusing on the response to the crisis in 2020 precipitated by a social justice movement kicked into high gear by Black Lives Matter. The pandemic shut the

doors of the theatres, but the racial reckoning would determine what kind of return they would make. Theatres were forced to defend their historical whiteness and address how that would change when they reopened the doors. All theatres experience various crises over the course of their existence; how was this crisis similar to or different from previous crises? How did these similarities and/or differences affect the response that was undertaken? What were the difficulties encountered in making changes? What has been the response to the changes that were made?

Boards of directors are comprised of members of the public who volunteer their time to serve. They volunteer for any number of reasons, including an affection for the theatre, a belief in volunteerism, or a desire for community. They are guided by the articulated mission, mandate and vision of the theatre, its by-laws, and often a set of policies that may be documented in a manual. As members serve for various periods of time, from a year to several years, the composition of the board is constantly shifting, with new members joining and needing to learn the organisation and their role in governing it, and longer-serving members leaving the board as their terms expire, taking with them the institutional memory.

The success with which a board of directors meets a crisis is affected by the constitution of the board, the training or development of its members, and the clarity and depth of its policies.

In Chapter 2, I examine the background in the field, the literature that exists, and what does not. There is less literature around governance of small and mid-sized arts organisations (and very little specifically about theatres), and much of what does exist is by American and/or British scholars. Further, the pause created by the pandemic suspended much research, and slowed publication as scholars returned to their work.

I begin Chapter 3 by situating myself in my research, as an Indigenous scholar, as a theatre professional in this country we call Canada, before outlining the methodology I employ, and introducing my case studies.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the interviews conducted in the first half of 2023 with the artistic leadership, management, and governors of five theatres across the country.

Chapter 5 focuses on the key insights gleaned from the data.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I posit some possible futures for theatre in 21st century Canada.

1.2 Contribution to Scholarship

I have been lucky in the most terrible way to be able to conduct this research in real time, from the beginning of the pandemic when the theatres closed through the tentative re-openings of 2021 and 2022, and the much-changed landscape of 2023 and 2024. Before the world shut down, I thought I would be writing a thesis that attempted to show how the board of directors was the wrong governance model for non-profit theatres. The sudden dual crisis in the world had huge ramifications in the theatre world and gave me the opportunity to watch the entire sector respond. There have been social justice movements before that have changed things for women, for people of colour, and for Indigenous folks, but rarely has there been such a confluence of so many, and never in such a time of high visibility due to the technology.

My research will contribute to a small body of academic and professional research around arts organisations in general, and theatre in particular. My focus on small to mid-sized theatres is in marked contrast to much, if not most, of the extant research which focuses on large arts organisations. Because of the timing of the research, undertaken on the cusp of, during, and coming out of the pandemic, it will serve as a snapshot of a moment in time. Further, as the sector works toward recovery, there is uncertainty about how theatre will return, if there will be a “new normal,” or if theatre will need to continue to adapt to ongoing crises, whether economic, environmental, or heretofore unimagined.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

My interest in the governance structure of theatres stems from thirty years in professional theatre as a playwright, a director, and the artistic director of a national company. At the beginning of my career, I was lucky enough to be funded to serve as an Associate Artistic Director at a small Winnipeg theatre, which allowed me to be present at board meetings and witness the directors at work. The experience immediately raised a number of questions: how were these obviously well-intentioned volunteers supposed to oversee the professional theatre-makers? What were their qualifications to approve the programming of the Artistic Director? Were they able to comprehend the financial documents presented by the General Manager?

A few years later, working within a large theatre, I came in one morning to discover that the Artistic Director had been fired at the previous night's board meeting and replaced by his associate. There was no explanation to the staff or the larger public, our questions deflected by the shield of personnel issues, and I wondered about who the board of directors answered to, if not the staff of the organisation or the public.

Over the next decade, I would watch as boards of directors fired Artistic Directors "without cause," and wonder about the reason. In 2003, I took on the artistic directorship of a theatre company that was so profoundly in crisis that the board of directors had decided to close it, before the theatre's community objected and insisted that the board find a way to keep it operating.

Throughout my career, I served on many juries and committees at various funders, which gave me the opportunity to read hundreds of grant applications from theatres across the country, which were signed by the chairs of the boards, but written and submitted by the managers of the theatres. These applications raised as many questions for me as did my personal experience and the knowledge-sharing that went on in the national theatre community. They expressed what the theatre believed it was doing, which was often quite different from how the theatre's work was perceived in its community, according to the assessors around the table. I wondered whether the directors who signed the applications, who were ostensibly representing the theatre's community,

were aware of the dissonance, or had even read the grants they signed. After one such jury, I travelled with one of the funder's staff, during which time I suggested that the board of directors model was the wrong one for non-profit arts organisations. She objected, saying this was the only model that existed, that there were no alternatives, and what choice do we have? I decided to return to school to gain a better understanding of what I perceived to be the problematic relationship between the board of directors and the theatres they govern.

For me, the purpose of theatre is to work things out in the air, to make sense of the world in which we all live through story. Audience members witness a story that perhaps they have not experienced – war, or betrayal, or a star-crossed love affair – and a sense of empathy is engendered through the act of witnessing.

Theatre matters because it is one of the last places, especially in this time of online abundance, where we can gather together, sit beside someone who might not hold the same beliefs, see the same story, and experience something similar to our neighbour. Theatre has served this purpose since humans began to gather. From the Greeks in 700 BC to the medieval Mystery plays to the Federal Theatre of the 1930s, theatre has told stories to make sense of the world, and in the process, made community.

At some point, organisations were created around theatre in order to facilitate the creation and delivery of the product, which is, in this case, plays. Herbert Simon suggested that we live in an “organization economy” and that organisations “allow human beings to do together, through interchange of information and the ensuing coordination of activity. The things they could not do independently” (Simon 2000, p. 750). Ergo, instead of one artist making work alone, she is supported by a structure, and as Houle observes “the shadow of founder is lengthened by the creation of a board” (Houle p. 5). Theatres are started by artists, or a group of artists, to pursue a particular vision. In pursuit of that vision, individuals make sacrifices, work hard to create art that can be shared. Nobody starts a theatre in order to create a board of directors, but in order to access public funds, foundation support, charitable tax status, and other resources, the individuals incorporate as a non-profit organisation. The organisation grows and as it grows acquires all the trappings of all the other theatres. The artist at the centre ages and he and/or the board begin to

think about legacy. If the theatre has been successful, and often its very existence is the definition of success, then the theatre begins to think about how (and very rarely if) the theatre will go on after its founder departs. But the theatre that was created ten or twenty years ago is not the theatre that exists now.

DiMaggio (1981) documented the beginning of the organisational model that emerged in the late nineteenth century around “high culture” – orchestras, for instance – which eventually was embraced by theatre, and as per Meyer and Rowan (1977), was adopted as much for legitimacy as for efficiency. As the administration grows up around the product, it grows further away from the purpose, to work things out in the air. The professionalization of the theatre means the adoption of formal structures – policies, practices, departments, committees – that further distance the art from those who are responsible for the oversight of the administration of the organisation created to facilitate its creation.

Governance is, by definition, “government, authority or control.” The question that governance answers is who has the power to make decisions, and to whom are they accountable? The Institute on Governance defines governance as “the system of rules, processes, and practices by which public institutions and organizations are managed and controlled” (Institute on Governance 2024), but many scholars have posited that governance is much more complicated than the role of the board of directors, and many of the functions of governance within an organisation may be carried out by “managers, members and advisory groups” (Cornforth, 2014, p.5). Renz and Andersson stated unequivocally that “governance is a function and a board is a structure” (2014, p.18). In the case of theatre, as the field developed, so did the institutional infrastructure surrounding and supporting it, governance models as well as formal and legal entities, and informal ones such as the characteristics of a community and the articulated value of theatre, all of which coalesce into “the rules of the game” (Hinings, Logue, and Zietsma, 170).

When arts organisations began to seek support from governments, they needed to show accountability for public funds. The board of directors model was imported from the corporate world with very few amendments to acknowledge the difference between the non-profit and the for-profit sectors. Where for-profit corporations have owners in the form of shareholders, for

whom the success of the corporation can be measured in dollars and dividends, a non-profit theatre is not owned so much as held in trust for a community. In the absence of shareholders, it is suggested that the stakeholders must still be identified and must then be represented by the board of directors (Houle 1990; Candler and Dumont 2010). Identifying a theatre's stakeholders is difficult as stakeholders may include audience members, artists in the community, the community itself, all of whom may have different ideas of what a successful theatre looks like. In the absence of what Carver called "the market test" (Carver 1997, p. 7), the board of directors must perform the function of evaluating and assessing whether its organisation is successful according to what may be a shifting set of values and a fluid roster of stakeholders. Further, as theatres evolve, growing and changing over time, so do the stakeholders, and accountability shifts.

The literature around non-profit governance tends to fall into two main themes: (1) the roles and responsibilities of the board of the directors; and (2) improving the performance of the organisation which is being governed. Often, the two are tied together; a well-functioning board will help improve the performance of its organisation (Carver 1997; McDaniel and Thorn 1994). To this end, an entire industry has grown up around helping to develop the board of directors, to make them a more effective governing body, to transform them into Boards That Make A Difference (Carver 1997).

There is ample literature that suggests that "the cottage industry of board improvement" is in fact working on the wrong problem, that the primary problem is one of purpose, that boards of directors often do not understand their roles and responsibilities (Houle, 1990; Ryan et al. 2003; Chait et al. 2005). A theatre board is in the position of governing professionals whose business is the production of theatre, something most board members drawn from the community know little about. A board is made to understand that it is accountable for the theatre, but it may not have a clear idea of what accountability means. The emphasis on agency theory – the idea that the board is the principal and the manager of a theatre is the agent – has led many a board to infer that its role is to police the managers of the organisation and raises the question of how exactly it can ensure the managers are serving the purpose of the organisation when it has no control over day to day operations. The board may understand its responsibility in preventing corrupt or criminal

behaviour – embezzling funds, for instance – but the board can only make decisions based on what information it receives from the managers of the theatre. According to a board’s by-laws, directors must meet a prescribed number of times each year, to be told by the managers how the business of the theatre proceeds. The directors do not have all the information, but in a textbook example of what Simon called “bounded rationality,” they have enough information to make decisions. The exercise can feel pro forma rather than meaningful or necessary, leaving directors wondering what purpose they actually serve.

Heimovics and Herman posited that non-profits are “basically hierarchical in structure with a board of directors in the superordinate position” (Heimovics and Herman 1990, 59), which implies that the board is accountable for the outcomes of the organisation. The appropriation of the model from the corporate sector means there has been a propensity for dependence on agency theory, casting the board in the role of principal, acting on behalf of a set of stakeholders who are not easily identified, and the artistic leadership in the role of agent (Huse et al. 2009). The artistic leader has particular knowledge about how the theatre serves its mission, but the board member who is selected for their managerial expertise “may find the processes associated with the mission to be mysterious” (Reid and Turbide 2014, 164), creating a lacuna between the understanding of their role in oversight and the capacity to fulfil it.

Agency theory is not a particularly comfortable fit for the theatre sector, for a number of reasons: it presupposes that managers will act in their own interests, something to which managers object; it assumes that the board of directors can identify its many stakeholders and knows how to balance off their various interests which are often in conflict; it assumes that the stakeholders will be satisfied with the trade-offs made by the board; it assumes that the board of directors is able to monitor the work of the theatre (play selection, etc.) and to connect this work to the outcomes that occur; and it assumes that the board has available for its use the usual incentives used by business firms to keep managers accountable (e.g., linking pay to financial performance) when such is not the case.

As a result, theatres often embrace the stewardship model, in which the board provides less oversight of managers, and serves more as advisors. While a stewardship approach generates more trust between board and theatre leadership, it can also expose the organisation to possible opportunistic behaviour. While it are not the norm, such behaviour is observed from time to time when unscrupulous managers are removed because of financial malfeasance.

There is some evidence that boards use a mix of approaches from both stewardship and agency theory. In his recent research on accountability in socially focused non-profit organisations, Bruni-Bossio found that “although board chairs trusted management, they used incentives and controls akin to a principal-agent approach” (2020,120). While the research does not yet exist, it can be surmised that the balance between the agency model and the stewardship model might shift over the course of a leader’s tenure; as the board of directors grows to trust the leaders and their accounting of the theatre’s activities, the board may lean more into stewardship.

The characteristics of theatres described above – e.g., numerous and diverse stakeholders, lack of appropriate approaches to incentivize managers, difficulty in mapping manager activity to the outcomes valued by stakeholders – make theatres difficult to manage. Theatres are what James Q Wilson referred to as coping organisations, where “both outputs and outcomes are unobservable” (Wilson 1989, 169). Just as one cannot measure the crime that does not happen because of the police service¹, or identify precisely what learning is attributable to the teacher, the good that the theatre creates cannot truly be measured. This ambiguity about outcomes creates a parallel ambiguity around governance and accountability. The good that the theatres do is largely not measurable. The things that can be measured – finances, ticket sales, audience attendance – often take on inordinate importance because there are few mechanisms in place to measure other

¹ Wilson suggests that because the “level of order the officers maintain on their beat cannot be readily observed or, if observed, attributed to the officers’ efforts” (168), police departments increased measures to produce statistical evidence of their productivity – reports, arrests, tickets – to the detriment of order maintenance, or community service, or problem solving.

intangible benefits, such as the quality of life in the community engendered by the theatre, and its role in education, self-esteem, and mental health. Further, the ambiguity around who might be the stakeholders of the theatre means that the theatre is operating in something of a vacuum, on behalf of stakeholders that include the larger community, the neighbourhood, audience members, artists, and funders. In the event of a crisis – a funding shortfall, for instance – certain stakeholders like funders and businesspeople may be activated, while others like audience members and artists may remain oblivious. A theatre can also find itself being called to account by stakeholders it did not even know it had, and the effectiveness of the board of directors challenged by newly invested members of the community.

Over the decades, research about the role of the non-profit board and its effectiveness has grown substantially, with a great deal of it focussed on American or British cases. In the United States, much of the research has tended to focus on larger, more affluent organisations (Ostrower and Stone 2006) and philanthropy (DiMaggio 1982, Ostrower 2002). In Britain, research around the role of the board in both the public sector and the non-profit sector is often bundled together (Cornforth, 2003; Cornforth and Mordaunt, 2003). Similarly, much of the scholarship is rarely arts focussed, examining social service organisations, community-based or membership-based groups, advocacy groups and so on, alongside theatres and orchestras. In recent years, there has been more research in Canada, about Canadian organisations. Pat Bradshaw, Vic Murray and Jacob Wolpin undertook a survey of over four hundred non-profit organisations in Canada to explore the relationship between board behaviour and organisational performance (only 49 or 12% of the organisations studied were identified as Arts and Culture) (Bradshaw, Murray and Wolpin 1992). Johanne Turbide and her colleagues at HÉC Montreal have undertaken substantial research into the question of governance of non-profits in Canada. This includes attempting to understand governance of non-profit organisations by observing the actions of and interactions between boards and managers (Turbide 2005), and examining whether better governance could have prevented a multitude of financial crises in arts organisations in the last decade (Turbide, Laurin and Lapierre 2017).

Boards of directors very often do not know what their job is (Widmer 1993, Ryan et al. 2003). Having assumed the position in good faith out of a desire to meaningfully contribute to serving

an organisation about which they care or from a cultural belief in volunteerism, the new member finds herself swamped with documents that purport to orient her to her role as board member: by-laws, often in opaque legal language, policies, strategic plans, staff lists, annual reports, committee lists and terms of reference. Very often, the moment that the board is called upon occurs when the organisation is in crisis. In a 2013 study, Turbide and Laurin (2014) found that boards of directors were engaged in the control of and accountability for their organisations when their organisations were in financial crisis. Conducting research about what boards do in crisis while organisations are in crisis may be challenging for a number of reasons, including the speed with which the crisis happens, an unwillingness to talk about failure, or a “desire to cover up failings” (Cornforth & Mordaunt 2003). Most of the literature about organisations in crisis focusses on financial crisis, whether it is a financial crisis born of a positive situation, like the growth of the organisation as it took on more projects or facilities, enjoyed a higher profile and reputation (Turbide 2012), or a crisis instigated by mismanagement or wrongdoing on the part of the managers (Turbide 2005).

How non-profit organisations meet crises varies according to many factors: how aware the board is of the internal and external variables that affect their organisation (Ostrower and Stone 2010; Turbide and Laurin 2014; Murray, Bradshaw, and Wolpin 1992); the board of directors’ understanding of their role (Ryan et al. 2003; Cornforth 2005; Widmer 1993); and the intensity and duration of the crisis. Cornforth and Mordaunt (2003) identify four broad stages that a board may go through in turning an organisation around from failure: *recognition*, *mobilisation*, *action* and *transition*. While they recognise that the organisations may not progress through all phases, or through the phases in a linear fashion, all the cases that they examine were financial in nature. In a broad study of NGOs that experienced very public scandals in 1999-2000, all but one of the thirteen international cases were financial scandals, as were all ten American examples (Gibelman and Gelman 2001). Reid and Turbide observed that after a “crisis trigger,” boards moved quickly to “a pattern of high control, a managerial focus and a more external orientation,” becoming hyper-focused on financial matters to the exclusion of mission-oriented activities. Often, the frequency of board meetings increase, which ultimately proves unsustainable, “because of the intense focus on oversight as well as the substantially increased time required from volunteer board members” (Reid and Turbide, 2014, p. 173). Mordaunt and Cornforth

similarly noted that in times of crisis, boards of directors “take a very hands-on approach, sometimes taking over aspects of the organisation’s management” (Mordaunt and Cornforth, 2004, p 9). The response of the board to the crisis is complicated by a number of factors, including whether the crisis is sudden or gradual, or not wanting to ask questions for fear of appearing impolite (Mordaunt & Cornforth 2004).

In recent years, there has been a movement away from the notion of one size fits all governance model and towards governance that is responsive to the context in which an organisation operates, recognizing the external and internal variables that affect every aspect of the organisation, and the reality that organisations are constantly changing. Ostrower and Stone (2010) offered a “contingency-based” framework to help interpret the data being gathered in the field, concluding that board governance is “a conditional phenomenon” wherein boards will respond differently under different circumstances to different factors. Some have suggested a rethinking of strategy, a recognition that the most important board work can be “highly episodic,” like that of firefighters’ and inculcating a sense of meaning and connection in board members in the downtime (Ryan et al. 2003). Other authors suggested that the pandemic has shown that boards will “need to be remarkably agile, flexible and responsive to the ever-changing environment to ensure survival” (McMullin and Raggio 2020, 1185).

Institutional change is slow. DiMaggio (1981) outlined the beginning of the organisational model that would come to be embraced by high culture, including theatre, in the late 1800s.

Organisations begin to institutionalize, adopting practices and structures that confer upon them legitimacy, rather than necessarily improving performance (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Further, other organisations in the same field begin to mimic each other, to become more like each other, creating “an environment that constrains their ability to change further in later years” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The further down a path an organisation travels, the harder it is to change direction, or structures, and boards can be daunted by the prospect of starting over, wary of sunk costs, afraid that if they pick “the wrong horse” (Pierson, 2000), they will find themselves an outlier, outside the developing resources in the field or sector.

Even when institutions desire to make change, they may launch initiatives that signal change, which “function as powerful myths,” and may be adopted “ceremonially,” but do not enact

concurrent structural changes that would ensure their success (Meyer and Rowan, p. 340). Organisations may institute new roles simply as a token gesture, “window dressing over the same old organisational practices” (Campbell 2004, p.43). Of course, these new rules and policies may over the long run lead to change as staff and managers within an organisation take the new policies to heart and try to use them to make substantive change. However, these changes are incremental at best, and as Atkinson (2011) noted, the pull of the status quo is persistent. Faced with uncertainty, decision makers will make “small adjustments from the status quo based on what is practical and what is possible” (Atkinson, p.10). Even in moments of significant upheaval, of punctuated equilibrium, institutions will gravitate towards stability, and the status quo (Campbell 2004, Atkinson 2011, True et al. 2018).

The unprecedented events of 2020 have created something of a lacuna in the existing state of knowledge. There is little formal literature on this moment for a few reasons: everyone moved online for a year or more, severely limiting fieldwork; the crisis turned out to not be a moment, but an ongoing state; there is still little sense of what the “new normal” might be, or if there will even be a new normal. McMullin and Raggio, writing during the first year of the pandemic, offered two approaches for non-profit boards, “depending on whether the environment returns to a pre-COVID-19 “normal” or if the environment remains turbulent and unpredictable” (McMullin and Raggio, 2020, p. 1185). In 2024, that sense of uncertainty remains.

Much of the work documenting this time falls in the realm of grey literature: reports, strategic plans, public statements on websites. Some of the grey literature is not actually literature – the written word – at all, but recorded panels, discussions, and presentations. This move to online is not only the result of the lockdown most of the world experienced, but a recognition of the need to address events in a timely fashion to be seen as responsive and accessible. Theatres entered into conversations with their communities, posting statements on their websites, articulating the theatre’s understanding of its role in white supremacy, oppression and/or racism.

The confluence of events and technology allowed for an unprecedented public conversation about inequity and social justice. While scholarly work has been slower to appear, the abundance of online publishing has kept the conversations going and growing, expanding from discussions

of inequity in one area to include examinations of power and power-sharing in another, evolving from one area – e.g. theatre – across discipline and sector, and offering an opportunity to make new knowledge.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

I returned to school to acquire the tools to examine the non-profit governance model under which most theatres operate, and to interrogate the accepted wisdom that this model was the only one that would work for reasons of accountability. When my community – my theatre community – heard that I was conducting research into the model and possible alternates, many of them contacted me to tell me their stories, mostly horror stories, and express an interest in reading my work on the subject.

This is another reality of my research. I am an Indigenous scholar. My mother was Algonquin from Kitigan Zibi in Quebec, and my father was an Irish immigrant to this country in the 1950s. He was her math teacher at St Mary's Residential School in Kenora,² which means that I am a literal and figurative product of the residential school system in this country. Being a “halfbreed” has meant a lifetime of seeing both sides of a situation, of acquiring the tools of the dominant culture, and using them in service to my communities.³ Having an Indigenous worldview has meant an understanding of *wâhkôhtowin*, the knowledge that we are all connected, all in relation to each other.⁴ My understanding of *wâhkôhtowin* means I am also responsible to all my relations, all of the beings who are connected to me.

What this means in my research is that I am not able to perform an objectivity that I do not have, or pretend that I am not connected to the subjects of my research. My long history in Canadian theatre makes me an insider researcher, while doing the research as a graduate student in an academic institution confers on me outsider status. My insider status gave me access to the theatre makers I wanted to interview: when I reached out to possible interview subjects across

² St. Mary's was my mother's second residential school. Taken from her community when she was seven years old and sent to a sanatorium for treatment for tuberculosis, she was released to a residential school in Spanish, Ontario. After a summer home on her reserve, she went to St. Mary's. My father, unable to find work as a draughtsman when he arrived in Canada, took the job teaching mathematics in St. Mary's. He would go on to work as a supervisor at McIntosh residential school, before it burned down.

³ A derogatory term, Maria Campbell's 1973 memoir *Halfbreed* reclaimed the word for a generation of Metis and mixed-raced individuals.

⁴ While I am Algonquin on my mother's side, I was born and raised in Cree territory, and my elders have encouraged me to “learn the language where you live, Yvette.” Hence, I have learned *wâhkôhtowin* as a Cree word and concept.

the country, many of them agreed because we were already in relationship, because they trusted me to do the work in a good way, and because they were invested in the subject of my research. My insider/outsider status meant that the interviewees could trust that I understood the language they were speaking, the jargon and the logistics of running a theatre, that I would be less likely to misconstrue the meaning of the words, and I could be trusted to convey the information accurately in the research. Ironically, this role as a kind of cultural interpreter is a position in which I have often found myself throughout my life, though usually it has been interpreting between Indigenous ways of being and existence in the dominant culture.

While I employ no single methodology, my Indigenous practice may be construed as autoethnographic, and at the beginning of my research I was drawn to grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Glaser and Strauss 1967) as a method of analysing the data. Grounded theory allows for a continuing questioning of what the captured words say, and how my own biases and worldview inform my response to the words. The precepts of grounded theory remind me that “we don’t separate who we are as persons from the research and analysis that we do. Therefore, we must be self-reflective about how we influence the research process and, in turn, how it influences us” (Corbin, 2008).

The methodology I draw on most is in fact dramaturgy, which stems from my practice as a theatre artist. Dramaturgs spend hours at conferences debating the definition of dramaturgy, but at its core, the role of the dramaturg is to support the development of a play by asking key questions, starting conversations around the subject, researching, providing context, and teasing out the story from what can be an immense amount of data.

While this might be an unconventional approach to analysing data, it has much in common with the philosophy and methods of grounded theory, without the rigid coding and creation of subcategories and sub-subcategories. But the concurrent collection of data and analysis, and the reliance on theoretical sensitivity in grounded theory are also the tools of the dramaturg. Like the academic researcher, the dramaturg works to remain outside the site of inquiry, observing and not imposing their assumptions on the data.

The practice of the dramaturg is to help uncover the story that is there; she does not create the story, but helps to make sense of the various threads of story that are being created by the playwright, or collective.

From February to June 2023, I conducted interviews with the Artistic Directors, Executive Directors, and Board Chairs of five performing arts organisations across the country. I chose to approach small to mid-sized theatres for a number of reasons: there is far less research on small and mid-sized theatres than on big arts organisations – symphonies, ballets, art galleries – with much larger budgets and boards of directors; I suspected that small and mid-size theatres would be nimble enough to respond to the crises more quickly than large ones; I was curious about people who volunteer to serve on the boards of directors of theatres in their communities. Because the theatre community in this country is small, and because I have been a part of it for three decades, I was able to choose which theatres to approach. I wanted to include a theatre that had experienced a very public crisis, as well as one that seemed to have weathered the pandemic well; I wanted to speak to managers and directors from various regions; I wanted to look at theatres in different size centres. Every theatre manager I approached agreed to interviews, and made introductions to their board chairs, who also agreed to interviews.

Table 3.1 displays the theatres’ similarities in size and structure, and whether they owned or operated a facility. While titles occasionally varied, part of the ongoing change since the events of 2020, the roles remained essentially the same.

Table 3.1 Interview subjects and their roles

Organisation	Interviewees	Interview #	Size	Facility	Region	Board Size
A	Artistic Director Executive Director Chair	1 2 3	Small (5 FT staff)	No	East	9
B	Executive Director Artistic Director Chair	4 5 6	Mid-sized (15 FT staff)	Yes	Prairie	15
C	Executive Director Artistic Director	7 8	Mid-sized (13 FT staff)	Yes	Prairie	14

	Chair	9				
D	Director of Operations	10	Mid-sized (6 FT staff)	No	West	10
	Director of Programming	11				
	Chair	12				
E	Executive Director	13	Mid-sized (15 FT staff)	Yes	West	11
	Artistic Director	14				
	Chair	15				

Interviews with the leaders of the theatres were conducted in person, or on zoom, depending on geography, and lasted between 30 minutes and 90 minutes. Each individual was asked the same five questions, which were designed to elicit how each leader within the organisation assessed their organisations' responses to the crises of 2020. Because the respondents were being interviewed because of the role they held in their organisation – Artistic Director, Executive Director, Chair of the Board of Directors – their answers illuminated the similarities and differences in their understanding of the impacts on their theatres.

Table 3.2 outlines the questions asked in the interviews to all respondents. Individuals were interviewed in their capacities as officials of their theatre, either as members of the board or as managers of the theatre, and so the questions were about what strategies were undertaken at their theatre, and the response to those strategies. Interviewees were not asked for their opinions.

Question 1 allowed each interviewee to state how they understood their place in the organisation. Question 2 gave them the opportunity to identify not only the impact of the events of 2020 but also identify the events themselves and prioritize them.

Question 3 was about the responses to the crisis or crises at the time, in 2020, whereas

Question 4 allowed the respondents to assess the longer-term impacts on their organisations.

Question 5 was the most immediate question for the respondents as many of the theatres had just begun to reopen and the responses of the stakeholders were relatively fresh, or ongoing, or yet to be determined.

Table 3.2 Interview questions

Interview Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Describe the role of the Board, the Artistic Director, and the Executive Director in your organisation.2. What was the impact of the events of 2020 on your theatre?3. What actions did your theatre take in response to the events of 2020?4. What changes have been made to the practices and policies of the theatre over the past three years?5. How have the theatre’s stakeholders responded to the changes that have occurred?
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In addition to the interviews, I gathered annual reports, strategic plans, and community consultation reports of each of the organisations, as well as any statements made by the organisations and published on their websites.

As I conducted the interviews over the course of four months, I began to hear the similarities and differences in the stories the interviewees were telling. The order of the questions lent itself naturally to narrative with a beginning (the events of 2020), a middle (the three years since), and an end (where the interviewee was at the moment).

The tendency to narrative also contributed to a momentum in the interviews. Most respondents took over the story by question 3, describing the actions undertaken by their theatre and going on to talk about practices that had changed, policies that had been implemented, and how the theatre’s stakeholders had responded.

The open-ended nature of the questions allowed the interviewees to define for themselves what “the events of 2020” were. All of them spoke of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the social justice movement that arose after the murder of George Floyd.

The dramaturgical approach allowed me a flexibility in analysing the data that coding would not. While half of the interviewees used the term EDI (equity, diversity, inclusion) or JEDI (justice, equity, diversity, inclusion), many of them did not, but they still spoke of equity, inclusion, or diversity, often using adjectives (inclusive or diverse). Other words like care, reckoning, and

anti-racism were used when talking about how the theatres responded to the events of 2020, and how policies were created. The singular interviewee who did not speak of equity issues directly used coded language like “the mix,” “the composition” and “the particular audience.”

Each of the interviewees told a story, and all their stories together told a larger story about a moment in time. Each situated themselves in their organisation through their description of their role, and their relationship to the other roles. From there, each referred to the past (the events of 2020), the present (the changes made in policy and practices), and in most cases, the future (how the new policies will impact the theatre moving forward). The articulation of the future of theatre was an unintended benefit, because I did not ask for opinions or prognostication. Nevertheless, for the interviewees, the opportunity to assess where they had come from and where they found themselves now led naturally to an expression of where they hoped or feared or believed their theatres were headed.

As the interviewees told their stories, so did I assemble the data in the form of a story. The themes that I identified also followed a chronology: the impact of COVID-19, the impact of George Floyd’s murder, the responses in the change of programming which necessitated a change in faces, which in turn affected the stakeholders. The change in policies and practices have been an ongoing process and underlying theme that inspired the discussion of the path ahead.

The practice of dramaturgy is one of surfacing themes and ideas. Most often with playwrights, the dramaturg identifies what is being said and says, “this is the ‘what’ I am hearing, and this is the story I see emerging.” The playwright or creators can then check if that is indeed the story they want to tell and adjust accordingly. In this case, I am saying, with my analysis of the data, “this is what I am hearing and this is story I see emerging,” but how the creators of the story – the theatre makers of this country – move forward is yet to be seen.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Over the course of 2020, I began to refer to the two major events of the year – the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial reckoning precipitated by the murder of George Floyd – as the pandemics, plural. Although also an adjective, we use the word as a noun, meaning a disease that is prevalent throughout a country, continent or the world, which COVID-19 certainly was. But the racial reckoning that erupted in May 2020 also exposed a dis-ease as prevalent, the ramifications of which are still being felt.

Beginning within three months of each other, the two events are bound together for many. Declared a global pandemic on March 11th, 2020, the first lockdown in Canada was in Ontario on March 17th (two days before California, the first state in the United States), and states-of-emergencies continued to be declared over the next few weeks. Confined to their homes, people were dependent on media for their news about an “unprecedented” global event. Just over two months after the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police, and a bystander video uploaded to the internet a few hours later set the racial reckoning in motion.

In spite of prohibitions on gatherings, people gathered and marched, across the United States, in Canada, and around the world. Those who did not march watched the protests, violent in Minneapolis, peaceful in most places, which rolled across the world in the weeks after May 26th. Tuesday, June 2nd was designated Blackout Tuesday, an action initiated by the music sector to protest racism and police brutality. On social media, people and organisations posted Black Squares to show solidarity with Black Lives Matter and Black people.

Perceived by some as virtue signaling, Black Square Tuesday also started conversations and callouts of many organisations that had yet to demonstrate a real commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Those conversations and callouts continue to have reverberations in the theatre community, as evidenced by the answers of the respondents. Almost three years after the beginning of the pandemic, when I asked them about the impact of the events of 2020, not a

single person spoke only about COVID-19, but about the twin impacts of the pandemic and social justice movement set in motion by the murder of George Floyd.

This chapter describes the impacts of the pandemics on theatres as understood by their board chairs and senior managers. The responses from their interviews illuminate the discrepancy between the managers understanding of the way forward and that of the board. The differential illustrates the challenges theatres will face moving forward in the next few years.

I begin with a brief review of the background of the sector and **the challenges theatres are facing**. From there, I examine the events of 2020 and **the impact of the pandemic**, and then **the impact of the racial reckoning** on theatres. Next, I explore **the actions taken**, immediately and over the three years since. Finally, I will investigate how those changes made are affecting their organisations, and how board members and managers see **the path ahead**.

4.1 The Challenges Theatres Are Facing

At the time of this writing, more than four years since the pandemic began, theatre after theatre in the United States is closing, downsizing, reducing programming, and/or laying off staff. Canadian theatres are warily watching. While Canadian theatre benefits from robust public funding in the Canada Council for the Arts (and in many provinces, from provincial funders), that funding represents only a portion of any theatre's budget, from perhaps 50% at a small, ethnoculturally mandated theatre to 9% at a major multimillion dollar festival. The rest of the budget is made up of sponsors, fundraising efforts, and box office.

At the June 2023 gathering of the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT), members talked about the 35% of audiences that were not returning. In January 2024, a mid-sized prairie-based theatre cancelled the last week of performances of a show that was yet to open, another announced it is laying off most of its production staff – six out of seven employees – at the end of the season, and a long-established mid-size theatre in Toronto cancelled the last show of its season, demonstrating that Canadian theatres are not much safer than American ones.

In the 1970s, in an effort to ensure a portion of the funding necessary to produce their work, theatres began to offer subscriptions to their seasons. The influx of money at the end of one fiscal year and the beginning of another gave theatres a cushion with which they could begin the work of casting, contracting and marketing. Danny Newman, the most vocal and visible champion of subscriptions, attributed the success of regional theatres in the '60s and 70s to the model's widespread adoption. Newman's 1977 *Subscribe Now!* served as a textbook for theatres across Turtle Island. But the philosophy that Newman espoused – that theatres “owe very little to the general public. They owe a great deal to their specific public, their subscribers, who are more and more becoming their contributors” (27) – prefigures the challenges theatres would face in coming years.

Newman believed that subscribers would attend whatever the theatre offered them, that their loyalty was to the theatre and the artistic vision of its leaders, and that may well have been true for many years (and is still largely true in Quebec, where French theatre-goers often have subscriptions at “their” theatre), but the debt he felt the theatre owed the subscriber could become a liability. Theatre producers felt the pressure to cater to the subscriber, inhibiting risk and artistic choice; the number of subscribers determined the length of the run of the show, as every subscriber needed to be accommodated; conversely, shows that were successful and could afford to run longer needed to close to make room for the next show in the subscription package. Further, the loyal subscriber was aging and not being replaced; younger theatre goers were too busy to commit in advance to specific dates.

Theatre Facts, the Theatre Communications Groups annual survey of American theatres, reported in 2005 that revenues from single ticket sales began to outweigh revenues from subscriptions. The number of individual subscribers continued to drop over the ensuing years, 17% from 2006 to 2011. In a 2012 article in *American Theater*, Jonathan Mandell noted that theatre managers had long been clocking the dropping subscription sales, “some say it began happening as far back as two decades ago” (30). In Canada, the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT) also executes frequent surveys and reports in an attempt to track the state of theatre in this country. A report entitled *Ticket Sales Trends Survey Results*, released in September 2022, noted that theatres were aiming at 66% of pre-pandemic ticket sales and

achieving 66% percent of that objective, or 44% of pre-pandemic sales. Furthermore, according to the survey, “Theatres report that fewer audience members are purchasing season subscriptions and many are purchasing their tickets much closer to the performance date than before” (5).

Theatres have been struggling to find an alternative model, offering memberships that allow patrons to choose which play or plays they wish to purchase tickets for, flex-passes that offer maximum choice in scheduling, or pay-what-you-can season tickets. Younger theatre goers are not opposed to subscriptions – most have Netflix– but they seem to value spontaneity and flexibility.

But as recent research shows, fewer people are buying subscriptions, making the single ticket buyer more important to the theatre’s bottom line, and necessitating a change in the approach to engaging them. Single ticket buyers rarely willing to attend the theatre just because it’s there. They need to be engaged with a show for a reason, whether the subject matter speaks to them personally, or it offers innovative staging, or it connects them to community in a specific way. Engaging the single ticket buyer is labour intensive, and often, what engages them for one show in the season does not extend to other three or five or eleven shows on the docket.

The growth of a Canadian theatre in the 1970s and ‘80s also led to the construction of facilities across the country, which require resources to be maintained. Some of the facilities are repurposed buildings, like Factory Theatre’s Victorian house on Adelaide Street in Toronto, Manitoba Theatre Centre’s Warehouse Theatre in Winnipeg, and the Firehall Arts Centre in Vancouver. Many others were purpose built: Manitoba Theatre Centre’s 785-seat Mainstage was constructed in 1970, Saskatoon’s Persephone Theatre opened in 2007 boasting a 421-seat Mainstage and 150-seat Backstage Stage, and Vancouver’s Arts Club opened its newest building, the BMO Theatre Centre, in 2015, which it shares with Bard on the Beach, and contains a 250-seat theatre, four rehearsal halls, costume shops and offices. But all facilities require maintenance and staff, and operation and maintenance costs are non-negotiable; utilities, taxes, and maintenance staff must be paid. Rising costs represent bigger portions of the theatre’s budget, reducing the portion that can be committed to the plays and artists, forcing theatre managers to

choose smaller cast plays, hire fewer artists, and reduce production values, all the while striving to convince a waning audience that the experience of theatre is worth its time and ticket price.

All these factors were at play when the pandemic hit in March 2020. Theatres had been striving to bring in new audiences, younger and more culturally diverse while maintaining the largely older, largely whiter subscriber base that ensured a financial cushion, as well as managing facilities with fixed costs.

4.2 The Impact of the Pandemic

When the WHO declared the coronavirus a global pandemic, the world effectively shut down. Governments issued stay at home and shelter in place orders, travel ceased, and most of the world turned to their electronic devices – televisions, computers, and cellphones – for information, entertainment, or diversion.

Theatres suspended productions, shows that were about to open did not open, and staffs were sent home. Administrators moved to remote work to comply with public health orders and began to create back up plans for the rest of their seasons. Few people believed, in those first weeks, that the enforced pause would last more than a few months.

The effects on theatres were immediate, though how they responded to the sudden loss of purpose varied. For the chair of one theatre, the impact was immense.

“It was pretty devastating. It was a complete and overnight halt to everything that we had planned.” (#9)

For artistic directors, the work onstage may have stopped, but there was still work to be done behind the scenes.

“It happened in the middle of our Festival so we paid out the remainder of the first weeks ... and we paid the fees to the two that that couldn't that couldn't come. And we paid half of what the

actors and the creative team would've made for the final show that we had to cancel. We kept our staff... full time staff were kept on.” (#14)

“We cancelled a show before lockdown was even announced, and we switched to a live stream before the lockdown was announced, and I think we did the first live stream in Canada that was Coronavirus related, but it was out of an abundance of caution and an understanding that the experts were already saying that this might be years, and that we should be taking it seriously, and everyone in the industry was saying, “Well, let's wait and see.” (#1)

In those first few days of the pandemic lockdown, many thought that it would only be a matter of weeks before things would return to normal, but weeks turned into months, and theatres found themselves cancelling one show after another. Few cancelled the rest of their seasons outright. Many began making plans to launch new seasons in the new calendar year, early in 2021. When it became apparent that theatres would not re-open anytime soon, the government rolled out assistance for the sector. In the fall of 2020, the government of Canada announced \$181.5 million “to help provide work opportunities for Canadian artists and cultural workers and stabilize the overall environment.” For some, the assistance not only helped the organisation to survive, but enabled theatres to reduce deficits. Both chairs and artistic directors recognized the importance of government support, as these comments illustrate:

“We kept our heads above water financially and really that was because of the grants from government.” (#9)

“So we were in a good financial situation without government support, and then government support came in and we were able to increase our programs... and pay down the deficit a little bit.” (#1)

No longer able to gather, theatres “pivoted” to the online world, in an effort to stay visible. They had of course had an online presence in order to market and publicize their live performances, creating trailers similar to movie trailers, posting interviews with actors and members of the creative team about the work, but those initiatives were all in order to entice the public into the

theatres. Now they worked to find ways to deliver similar content in a new way. For many of the theatres, doing work online was a necessary challenge, as this artistic director points out:

“Every two weeks we were doing something online so that was...that was really kind of neat creating content in my living room. But it was good, we did play readings and we did interviews and we just we wanted to make the audience aware that we were still here and that we weren't going under.” (#14)

Meanwhile, the chair of this theatre did not consider the work the theatre was doing as essential.

“We were just kind of coasting along, doing the bare essentials, trying to keep ourselves visible to the public.” (#9)

The online presentations of plays that were in development, readings of plays with actors on zoom from their living rooms and home offices, faced all the attendant challenges of the technology: lag time, unstable signals, choppy or frozen visuals, and audio cutting out when more than one person speaks. Theatre makers who had spent their careers making things to be experienced in three dimensions now tried to create work that would engage viewers through a computer screen.

4.3 The Racial Reckoning

On May 25th, while administrators were trying to imagine when and how they might reopen their theatres, George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis police officer, and the video of his murder was broadcast to a populace who were glued to their screens, igniting a racial reckoning that would affect every aspect of the theatre's existence.

The racial reckoning that rocked the theatre sector did not happen out of nowhere. The decade leading up to the ignition provided the tinder. The #metoo movement had been smouldering for years. Tarana Burke coined the phrase in 2006, and in 2017 a number of high-profile film actresses began to use the hashtag to bring attention to the ubiquity of sexual assault. Occupy Wall Street sprang up in 2011 and changed the conversation about economic inequality. Black

Lives Matter launched its hashtag in 2013 after the acquittal of the murderer of Trayvon Martin. In Canada, in 2012, four Saskatchewan women began Idle No More, an Indigenous rights movement that swept the country. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had delivered its report which included 94 Calls to Action intended to point Canadians towards a path of reconciliation. A year later, the Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) began its work, delivering a report in June 2019. All these social justice movements were asking for change long before the murder of George Floyd, and in fact many arts organisations, galleries, and museums as well as theatres, had begun to take steps to address the inequities in the organisations, encouraged by funders. The Canada Council for the Arts had begun to ask theatres to show a commitment to diversity, to gender parity, and to the inclusion and engagement of Indigenous people, Deaf people, and people with disabilities. Provincial funders as well had made equity a priority, articulating a commitment to serving “diverse artists,” signaling to theatres that their funding would be tied to serving a more diverse constituency.

Many theatres across the country responded to the rage and grief over the murder of George Floyd by making public statements of solidarity on their social media. Because the Black Lives Matter movement was instrumental and highly visible in the demonstrations in the days that followed the murder, many theatres’ statements included the statement that Black Lives Matter. One board chair frankly described the immediate effect on his board:

“I’ll just talk about us as a board: we were just kinda scared shitless, like, what are we supposed to do, what are we supposed to say? We live in this world right now – “cancel-culture,” right? Where there is a fear, particularly for a, you know, a guy like me: a, you know, middle-aged, well-to-do, privileged, white guy... And so, how do we respond as an organisation? What’s our obligation, what do we do, what do we say? And we don’t wanna get it wrong. I think to some degree at the board level, that led to a little bit of paralysis, you know.” (#9)

Interestingly, this chair’s statement indicates that there was some intimation of the change that theatres needed to make, before the racial reckoning began, but no indication that the theatre had begun to undertake any until forced to by the events.

This reticence was evident in other organisations, sometimes causing friction between the managers and the board about what kind of a statement the organisation would issue. This friction is evident in the comments of two executive directors:

I had made a phone call to one board member and said, “I’m highly concerned with the board’s lack of willingness to make a statement, and to have some action tied to it.” (#7)

“The Chair of the board said “Why do we have to single-out this one group? Can’t we stand in solidarity with everyone?” And the thing that was different was that I didn’t have to defend that work. One of the other board members, who works at BMO, was like, “But everyone’s putting these statements out: like, BMO put a statement out, I saw Scotiabank’s statement...” Like, “Of course we had to make this statement, everyone’s making these statements,” and then the Chair backed down... for sure that wouldn’t have happened before the Pandemic.” (#2)

Sometimes the statements made by theatres were challenged by their communities, perceived to be performative. One executive director gave an example of how the community challenge of the theatre escalated:

“People who were very interested to hear what we had to say about things, things escalated very quickly, the AD in particular was called out, the board was called out, the institution was called out, things moved so quickly, we were called out by PACT, we had meetings, late in the evening meetings with PACT, one of the most pivotal points was within 24 hours of the Black Square Tuesday after we’d posted our black square with zero words of support in a purely performative act, there were members of the community and former members of the community that wanted a conversation with leadership and they wanted it right fucking now, so we set up a zoom. At that point I was engaged in several conversations with the board they were calling me asking me ... we released a statement, I wrote a statement.” (#4)

Often, what began as a “purely performative act” led to larger conversations with broader groups of stakeholders. Theatres held community conversations, town halls in person or online. Some of the larger theatres responded to being called out by hosting online conversations for artists to

articulate their experiences within the host theatre. Stratford Festival hosted online events like #InTheDressingRoom and Black Like Me, and a similar event facilitated by the First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Advisory Circle. The Festival hired fourteen artists and staff to form an Anti-Racism Committee that delivered a report on the experience of being non-white at the Festival, and then created a parallel committee to read and respond to the findings. Many theatres found that these conversations were just the beginnings of a process, and the process was going to be painful, as illustrated by these comments by the executive director and board chair of one theatre:

“We started off by some community consultations, and community town halls the first one we did was horrible, it was horrible, we did not do that right.” (#4)

“There were a number of other factors, a number of meetings, or opportunities to hear from the community that were really... impactful. You know we asked a bunch of folks from the community to come in and tell us what their experience was.” (#6)

“We also engaged (someone) to host some online town halls for us where there was nobody from (the theatre) on these calls so it just removed any power dynamic that may have been at play and received the feedback for that... which to read is heartbreaking, you’ll cry you’ll wanna throw up when you read it it’s pretty awful.” (#4)

An executive director from another part of the country talks about their theatre’s process:

“There was an online forum for IBPOC artists within the community. (The Artistic Director) actually called up individual IBPOC artists because there was a lot of flack going around on you know with theatres making statements and then being called out on it so then (the Artistic Director) did apparently make particular individual calls to check in with individual artists but following that there was a group meeting like a community gathering of IBPOC artists who had been working at the (theatre).” (#13)

Both the upper management and the chair of the board of this theatre recognized the urgency of beginning a process:

“The board then went into – I don’t wanna say ‘damage control,’ but – they went into, like, community-focused-mode. So, I think the focus really was on the community, and providing transparency, and getting answers, and doing some investigation into what had happened, and preparing reports for the community to better understand.” (#11)

“There was a group of community members who brought together an advisory, consultations done and I was part of one of those asking how (the organisation) should move forward.” (#12)

4.4 The Actions Taken

The calls to make arts organisations more inclusive were sustained, impatient and impossible to ignore. Theatres that had posted messages of outrage and solidarity with Black Lives Matter were now being asked what actions they were going to take, and the pressure did not lessen significantly over the months of the pandemic. Theatres, arts service organisations (ASOs), educational institutions, music organisations continued to organize panels, discussions, and seminars to talk about decolonizing, about equity initiatives, about accessibility, about diversifying practices and audiences, so waves of discussion about EDI washed over people who were still staying home and largely connected to the world through the internet.

4.5 Change of Programming

As theatres made plans to reopen, managers recognized that their programming needed to be more “diverse” if their statements of solidarity were not to be only performative. This shift in programming was not well-received by all audiences, as noted by this executive director:

“The season wasn’t perfect but it did have diversity in it in ways that it had never before and had actors working with us that had never worked with us before and exposed our audiences to new stories and new people in ways that they hadn’t been before but there was definitely some pushback and you can see it in the tickets sales, subscribers on the end of the phone before we’re even contemplating a season were saying ‘well now you’re just gonna turn into a social justice theatre because of all this stuff’ and it’s like well, no things are gonna be different but the stories

are still gonna be the same great stories, maybe the playwright is Black... so that was disheartening to not have the support of our audience.” (#4)

The chair of the board was similarly disheartened:

Because art is political. It is! Even if, even if what you're putting on stage is Mary Poppins after Mary Poppins, that's political. But old, white people don't think that's political. Political all of a sudden means “a thing that I don't agree with”? I guess. (#6)

Many theatres had started to program more plays written by BIPOC writers before the pandemic, responding to the increasing calls for representation. They were responding to calls from their communities, to the changing demographics of their cities, the TRC Calls to Action, or to pressures from public funders. One artistic director traced the theatre's recent history:

*“We had previously done **Where the Blood Mixes** and **Rez Sisters** at various points prior to that, about seven years ago? We made a commitment to doing one Indigenous led production each season. A former board chair who was still on the board called me and she said ‘you're gonna run into resistance, there's rumblings and stuff.’ The concern was, are we ignoring other marginalized communities? We did Marcia Johnson's **Serving Elizabeth** last season, we did **Intimate Apparel** this year. I don't know why I haven't been doing it, it's totally my failing that that we haven't been doing that work before now. I have no excuse for it except it was a mistake on my part. And the audience is just - it's a good play and we're loving it.” (#14)⁵*

Theatres that had begun the work of representation continued to broaden their offerings on their stages. There have been many obstacles to BIPOC playwrights being produced: theatres might only program one BIPOC-penned show a season, and would lean on better-known, more

⁵ Of the four plays mentioned, Kevin Loring's *Where the Blood Mixes* won the Governor General's Award for Drama in 2009, Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* won a Dora Mavor Moore and a Chalmers Award for best new play in 1987, and was nominated for a Governor General's in 1988, *Intimate Apparel*, by Pulitzer Prize winning American Lynn Nottage won numerous awards when it premiered in 2004. Marcia Johnson's *Serving Elizabeth* was co-commissioned in 2017 by two Canadian theatres, Western Canada Theatre in Kamloops and Thousand Islands Playhouse in Gananoque, on the occasion of the Canadian sesquicentennial and premiered at Western Canada Theatre in February 2020.

frequently produced plays; in order to be published, a play needs to have been produced, so the scripts are not as readily available; plays by BIPOC writers often get premiere productions in small, independent theatres, and so have not been imagined for larger stages. Theatres began commissioning plays by BIPOC artists to develop more work for their stages and to open up the possibilities for Indigenous and racialized playwrights, as did this executive director's theatre:

"...we (established) the IBPOC play commission and we put some parameters around it, 12,000 dollars or 15,000 dollars to write a play. There's a panel that selects the play, it's IBPOC artists only. There are several different ways you can apply, you can send us a video, you can do it email, you can rap it, you can whatever, whatever your pitch was, so we did that..." (#4)

4.6 Change of Faces

The conversation about diversity on the stages of this country was not a new one. Racialized groups had been agitating for more representation for years, if not decades, funders had begun to encourage more inclusive programming and casting, and theatres were trying, with various levels of success to answer the call, as noted by one artistic director:

"We've had diversity in the casts to a certain extent, the same as most companies. One or two, you know, somebody here somebody there." (#14)

As noted, many theatres had begun the work of EDI before the pandemic, but as many of their leaders knew, it was not enough to change the faces on the stage. With the exception of ethnoculturally mandated theatres like Native Earth in Toronto, Black Theatre Workshop in Montreal, and fu-Gen Asian Canadian Theatre in Toronto, most theatres were not only led by white artistic directors and executive directors, but their boards of directors were also white and their administration and production staff was white. One executive director challenged the board to commit to real action:

"I reached out to this one board member, I said, "I need some support. I need the board to start making a commitment – I need the board to be brave in making a statement and having action behind it. That we need to look at the composition of this board and look hard at it. This has to

be a conscious effort to move forward in a different way. And we're looking at it and we're doing a bunch of work in terms of hiring practices.” (#7)

Changing the composition of the boards and the managers and the staff takes time, even with a conscious effort. Board members who may not have ever considered the homogeneity of the board table have to consciously “see” it. Board members used to look to fill skill set gaps – lawyer, accountant, HR person – have to think about who in their circles might have those skills and be non-White, or female, or LBGTQ. That exercise in itself can be discomfiting.

One board chair talked at length about the effort that had gone into bringing on directors who were not white, and whether the recruitment of BIPOC board members had changed the board or the way the board operates:

“I would say not enough yet. Like I would look at the way we do business on the board, the culture of the board, if I could put it that way, the kind of questions that get asked. I still think there's not enough tolerance... at the board level for dissent, and ideas that kind of come out of left field, if I could put it that way. (pause) 'Cause I think there's limited time at the board table... and there's an impatience that comes with not just kind of moving ahead and getting the business done, and I think, y'know, if you're truly going to make the board a more diverse place, and a place that is more welcoming of perspectives, then somehow we need to... create the space for those perspectives to get aired. And I think we're still kind of operating in this paradigm of how we always operated.” (#9)

Some theatres – especially theatres that had begun EDI work before the events of 2020 – recognized that this was an opportunity to move the whole discussion forward and took it upon themselves to work on behalf of the larger community. One artistic director expressed disappointment with the results:

“We had a meeting with all the senior management of all the arts organisations in the city and asked them two questions: where do you want to see your organisation in five years with respect

to equity, diversity and inclusion; and question number two, how do you want to get there? and it was a bit of a bust. It was – everyone was telling us what they already had in place...” (#14)

This reluctance to act could be indicative of a number of things: a failure to grasp how the world was going to change, a desire or belief that there would be a return to “business as usual” in short order, or perhaps just the freeze response, which many organisations experienced in the first few months of the pandemic.

Theatres that had been in the process of EDI work found ways to continue that work, on behalf of the larger theatrical ecosystem, even without necessarily buy-in from other organisations in the area. This executive director explained,

“...(the Artistic Associate) figured out some options and he and (the Artistic Director) started the arts leadership program...with arts, community, academic organisations ... so then they devised seminars, internships, they’ve done it for two years right now.” (#13)

In some cases, theatres that had been doing the work of EDI found themselves sought out by sister organisations. The executive director of a company that had just completed a multiyear program preparing for change found themselves in the position of expert:

“...suddenly, I was getting calls from other... companies, asking about our EDI strategy and stuff.” (#2)

4.7 Change of Stakeholders

The respondents identified a number of stakeholders in their theatres: artists, funders, sponsors, board members, and audiences.

4.7.1 Audiences

Theatres found themselves being challenged by their audiences who expressed dismay that their theatres were changing. One chair observed that some patrons were resisting even the most basic changes in operation:

“You get your old, white patrons who complain about – you know - the land acknowledgement at the beginning, and the way that we recognize our place in this community.” (#6)

As noted before, some audience members predicted that their theatres were *“just gonna turn into a social justice theatre,”* but the shift in programming resulted in some cases in new audiences, the audiences that theatres had long been seeking, as observed by one artistic director.

“Our last four shows, people – our box office person is the most cynical person in the world says we’re getting new audiences. They’re coming to the show– we had kids who had never been to a play before. They were Indigenous kids who had never been to a play, and this was the first play they saw. We did new plays and we snuck those in and people ate it up so...” (#8)

One of the obstacles to bringing in new audiences has been accessibility. Theatres have been perceived as elitist, their architecture often forbidding and fortress-like. In addition, the cost of attending shows has been and continues to be prohibitive. Tickets to a Stratford Festival production can be up to \$200 per ticket, Canadian Stage in Toronto and Manitoba Theatre Centre in Winnipeg up to \$100 per ticket, Theatre Calgary up to \$79, The Citadel in Edmonton \$125 per ticket. In response, many of the small to mid-sized theatres have begun to move to a sliding scale with tickets from \$20 to \$80 (Factory Theatre, Toronto), Pay-What-You-Can-Afford models with \$10, \$30, and \$60 dollar tickets (Theatre Passe Muraille, Toronto), Pick-Your-Price of \$15, \$25, and \$35 tickets (Great Canadian Theatre Company). The reduction in ticket prices has started to change the demographic of the audience, at least for some theatres, as the executive director of a theatre that adopted the Pay-what-You-Can model early noted:

“Trying to pass budgets and one of the things that was coming up was pay what you want and... everybody’s freaking out. And we’re saying listen we’ve got the data, it’s fine. New subscribers, new ticket buyers, a thousand four hundred in for each show, a thousand four hundred of new ticket buyers.” (#13)

The change in audience is a hopeful sign for theatres that had long been struggling to attract new theatregoers and to convince them that theatre is relevant to their lives, but the reduced price point in tickets will result in a reduction in the means to produce theatre. Smaller shows with smaller casts with more modest production values will address some of the shortfall, but theatres will have to look at the size of their administration, their production staff, their marketing budgets, and, if they have their own venues, the cost of operations and maintenance. Further, many theatres are locked into agreements with unions like the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) which has so far proved resistant to negotiating for change to ensure the survival of theatres.

The subscription model that so many theatres have depended on for so many years was, as noted, in trouble before the pandemic. The rise of streaming services and “free” content available on the internet made it easier for potential theatre goers to choose to stay in. Young people were not committing to the kind of structure that a subscription offered: first Thursday of the run for five or six shows over the course of eight months. Younger people did not seem to want a theatre program curated for them, but to choose their own events which may or may not be theatre. In spite of the weakening subscription sales, some theatres continue to try and revive the model, as this board chair expressed:

“It’s almost like you need to convince people all over again to come to the theatre and certainly to subscribe. That’s been another impact, that it’s harder to get people to subscribe. People will buy a single ticket, and they’ll maybe not do it super far in advance because there was so much uncertainty, stuff was getting cancelled, people didn’t make long-term plans and now, maybe we’ll get back there, y’know, maybe as stuff becomes, y’know, if you don’t buy a ticket, you’re not going to get in. If we can get back to that place, but right now people are like, “Eh, I’ll decide, y’know, and just kinda go maybe, or maybe I won’t” (#9)

4.7.2 Board Members

Other stakeholder groups did not necessarily sustain through the paroxysm of the pandemic. In some cases, artistic leaders left or were pushed out, executive directors became exhausted by the effort required to keep their organisations functioning. Sometimes, in response to the

accountability checks by the community, there was a complete change in both leadership and the board of directors. The director of programming of one theatre articulated the challenges that their theatre faced:

“We lost pretty much all the leadership. I mean (the managing director) stuck around, but he was pretty new to the organisation, and then the entire board was gone, and there was a new board that – like, a transition board which is made up entirely of artists or arts workers – that needed to come in. You can’t really have a board made up entirely of artists and arts workers. They’re notoriously busy people. It’s a volunteer gig, and how can we expect people who don’t really have the resources to be the ones to help steer it?” (#11)

Appointing artists and arts workers to serve as the directors of the board to solve one problem inevitably creates a series of others. Historically, directors have been appointed to boards of arts organisations from other arenas – financial institutions, the law, human resources – with the expectation that they bring those skills to the board table. They are connected to communities outside the arts world, and are ostensibly able to utilize their networks for the good of the theatre. Many theatres have in recent years begun to try to appoint an artist to the board, in order to have someone at the board table who truly understands the work of the theatre and is able to interpret for people who do not. This experiment has had mixed results, in some cases illuminating just how different the understanding of the theatre’s purpose can be. And as the previous respondent noted, the cost to an artist who is largely dependent on gig work may be prohibitive, compared to someone who has a salary. Further, an artist who may hope to get work at the theatre on which they serve as a director can be perceived to have a conflict of interest.

Appointing board members who are not artists, who ostensibly bring a different skill set to the board table is no guarantee that they will be good governors. Again, the lack of understanding of what a theatre actually does can be an obstacle, and as with any new job, the learning curve can be steep. As this director of programming noted, one skill set is not necessarily transferable to board work:

We have a new board member who, after the retreat was, “I think I need to have a whole org chart – I need to understand everyone’s role, or I need to see a, a calendar of the various grants that you guys are applying for, I don’t understand how any of this stuff works” (laughs). This is a former lawyer, right? So like, it’s so new to him.” (#11)

The model, according to this respondent, is the problem.

“The board structure is, that’s like kind of the main piece of the puzzle that makes it so challenging, we can’t really change that. We can change how we wanna relate to it, but then you really need the right kinda people on your board who are really willing to engage, right? ‘It (the board) was always operating beyond its abilities. Not necessarily in terms of people, but in terms of the revenue, though maybe sometimes in terms of the people.” (#11)

The desire for change led to some boards making cosmetic changes, but the structures that exist are resistant to change, manifesting even in the language around the table. One executive director outlined the obstacles to recruiting new board members from diverse communities:

“...when we talk about competencies on the board... every time they say it, and they continue to use the language even though she (this board member) is sitting there going, “I wouldn’t have been on the board. I don’t check any of these boxes... None of them.” They’re like, “Oh, you’re so valuable, you’re so valuable on the board,” and she’s like, “But do you not hear what I’m saying to you?” This doesn’t work if you’re wanting to have this board that’s representative of the community and that’s inclusive, and it’s so exclusive how you’re setting this up, but we continue to use that language because nobody knows... or there’s no leadership.” (#7)

4.8 Change of Leadership

Several of the theatres interviewed saw changes in leadership over the course of the pandemic. One went into the pandemic without an Artistic Director, and two lost Artistic Directors in the first months of the pandemic. The Executive Directors of two theatres left within two years of the beginning of the pandemic. One organisation saw the exit of its entire board. Many interviewees articulated that these changes were not a direct result of the coronavirus lockdown or the social

justice reckoning, but of issues that had been brewing for a number of years, the severity of which were exposed by the pandemic. Even though many leaders knew the industry needed to make change, and indeed many had begun to make change, the disruption was surprisingly violent, as one executive director articulated:

“The pandemic blew open the very wide cracks that were already there, spectacularly and in ways I could not have even imagined or predicted.” (#4)

In hindsight, one can see the cracks. The shrinking subscription base had driven artistic directors to try and program to entice a population that was aging and declining. Palatable programming was not capturing younger audiences, who enjoyed easy access to online entertainment. Schools whose resources were stretched thin no longer brought entire classes to the theatre as a part of their education, meaning a taste for live theatre was not being developed in the next generation. Even those who would be theatregoers had been deterred by programming in which they did not see themselves reflected. For years, there had been agitation in society about equity, about roles for women and people of colour, about power over what stories get told and by whom. A theatre that was not relevant to its community was not making the kind of box office that it needed to finance the work, and so it began to operate at a deficit, which in turn led to reductions in production values, which made the work less appealing to the audience it was trying to engage.

The world had been changing, but the leaders had not. Artistic directors who had been in their positions for ten or twenty years were operating organisations that had been established decades before. Often, they were managing the theatres the way they managed them when they were appointed, ten or twenty years ago, even though the realities around them had changed. The board chair of this organisation knew that changes needed to be made, but had not found a way to make it happen:

“The way that the organisation was being managed wasn’t changing in a significant enough way to actually make that any different. And then when the pandemic hit, all of that was really exacerbated.” (#6)

Not only were theatres facing financial uncertainty – sudden loss of revenues with no resumption in sight on top of accumulated debt and an ever-increasing deficit – they were suddenly having to address questions about workplace culture. Like the board chair quoted above, this director of operations knew there needed to be change:

“What was underlying this was not just the toxic work culture, but a significant deficit and a whole lot of decisions that were – a lot of things that had been ignored for many, many years that were then kind of brutally exposed through all of this.” (#10)

The brutal exposing of the underlying malaise coupled with the enforced suspension of public facing activities was also seen as an opportunity. The organisation that was created continues to grow, producing more, and perhaps moving away from the original impulse of the founder. This director of production recognized both the problem and a possible pathway forward:

“It was an opportunity to address a dynamic that had become unworkable in the organisation, and really goes back to 2018 and maybe even further, moving away from that founder-lead culture and what succession looks like. And so as soon as it wasn’t like we’re just in the crunch of needing to produce another, another, and another, it was just “Oh, this is just really not working”, and I think the approach that was taken was cut away, cut away to the bare bones, and then try and come back. (#10)

The circumstances that led to changes in leadership also informed the way theatres proceeded in their searches for new leaders. Boards of directors who listened to their communities heard, sometimes for the first time, that there was an expectation of a change in culture. One board chair noted how long it took for their board to acknowledge problems other than financial:

“We had accumulated a lot of debt and then when the pandemic hit, all of that was really exacerbated. Boards have an easier time wrapping their heads around money because everybody has a bank account, right? Everybody has credit card bills and a mortgage, or not a mortgage, or like, rental payments, or whatever, so that’s an easy thing for anybody, whoever they are around a board table, to wrap their heads around. So when some artists started reaching out and

talking to us about some concerns... We still, at that point, did not understand. As a board, we didn't understand. At this point, we've got the accumulation of you know, poor financial management, and now we've got this broken relationship with the people that we saw on our stage. Had we just ended our relationship over money, we wouldn't have even repaired any of the relationships that we had with any artists in the community. We wouldn't have had any concept of the way that the theatre had played a role in making that building not a safe space for everybody, and not a place of opportunity for everybody.” (#6)

Theatres – and many other arts organisations – have for decades grappled with the board model, as evidenced by an industry that has grown up around non-profit board development. Books continue to be written about how to make a better, more functional board, consultants make a better living than artists offering workshops on how to build a better non-profit board of directors, and theatre managers regularly enter into strategic planning processes with their boards to try and ensure that everyone is on the same page. The pandemic that exposed the “very wide cracks” and the many things “that had been ignored for many, many years” also offered a pause in which managers could reflect and imagine another path forward, as this director of production explains:

“There was an impulse, a real impulse, born out of some real necessity, to kind of explode the board model. And we are still in the process of figuring out what replaces the thing that got exploded.” (#10)

“Figuring out what replaces the thing that got exploded” is a process that is still underway for many theatres. Even though boards of directors often recognize that they are largely homogeneous, actually transforming themselves will require more than the “check-boxing” of which so many have been accused. Many theatres undertook internal reviews of their policies to try and ensure respectful workplaces and reporting procedures, and much of this work was done by members of the boards of directors, but this change in policies did not change the structure of the organisation substantially. Board meetings have almost without exception remained exactly the same: agenda, reports, financial statements, motions, Robert’s Rules of Order. The business

of the board remained divorced from the work of the theatre, which frustrates this artistic director:

“The board had very specific agendas that were set out, they were very fixed, they came from non-profit world, reams of documents were issued. The agenda for the meetings were broken down by minutes, they were probably about, let’s say ten to fifteen items on that agenda, and the Artistic Director’s report... the Artistic Director was given five minutes in the last ten minutes of the meeting.” (#8)

The frustration that the artistic director feels about the structure is shared by the board chair of the same theatre, who recognizes that for new members, for members from racialized communities who may not have been invited to serve on a board before, the formality and rigidity of the board meeting can be off-putting:

“We have made an effort to – we’ve got three individuals, who, you know, are visible minorities on the board so... It’s a slow process and we’re not good at it. We’re gradually trying. And I think we look different, we got some different people, but have we changed our norms and our way of working and sort of the culture at the board table... to really have that make a difference? I don’t know that we’re there yet.” (#9)

For the executive director of the organisation, the evidence that they are not there yet is clear:

“We had one Indigenous person on our board who just quit... she’s been challenged by the board’s thing all the time and they’re not listening to her... and she just... left.” (#8)

The events of 2020 presented challenges that no one had anticipated. The crises arrived not singly, but in waves, forcing boards to make decisions in the absence of information. The crises were not just financial in nature, but existential. Boards often found themselves being held accountable for things they did not know were part of their fiduciary duty.

4.9 Change of Policies

Many of the policies that were instituted over the course of the three years have aimed to make theatre workplaces more humane, to contribute to its employees' work-life balance. Theatre has customarily rehearsed six days a week, eight hours a day, with an additional couple of hours before and after the day for stage managers, directors, etc. Once the show begins technical rehearsals, there can be three or four "ten out of twelves," twelve-hour days with two one-hour meal breaks, leading up to opening, creating 60- to 80- hour workweeks. Designers, painters, technicians, often have to work around the time the actors are onstage, late into or all night long. Further, there was an implicit expectation that actors would work when they were sick. These attitudes and this kind of schedule were accepted as "just the way it is," part of "the show must go on" ethos, but the pandemic put a stop to working while sick, and proved that the show did not always go on. Further, the stress of the pandemic, the fear of contracting the virus or of infecting loved ones, the isolation, and the loss of in-person contact contributed to or exposed a mental health crisis that is still being felt, and artists took the moment to demand that theatres make changes that would address the situation. Some theatre leaders, like this artistic director, spoke about the human costs:

"Great administrators, great artists can work fast and do great work, but if you do that under adverse conditions, it makes your life a living hell, if you do that under joyous conditions, and knowing that there's a balance somewhere else, then it's actually thrilling." (#1)

The pandemic changed many things for many people, suddenly and unequivocally, but the structures that had developed over time were not able to change as quickly. Managers pivoted from producing theatre to caring for staff, as this executive director notes:

"The responsibility of leadership during 2020 to look after your people, during this time, and their mental health, and all of that kinda stuff. And the amount of work and effort that that was, and... I have a board that wants to manage me, they like that idea and that being a boss – never once asked me how I was doing. (#7)

The pause that the pandemic created gave theatres time to begin to address the concerns that were raised by artists and staff. Although the racial reckoning that began on May 25th made racism and white supremacy the issue, other kinds of inequities began to surface. Exclusionary practices that made artists of colour and Indigenous artists feel unwelcome or unsafe were challenged. Long-tolerated sexist or misogynist language became unacceptable. Once artists began talking about safer spaces, the conversation extended to the other circumstances that made work in the theatre unhealthy. The artistic director of this theatre outlined the changes they have undertaken in an attempt to address some of the issues raised:

“Wellness and capacity are big ideas so we moved to five-day workweeks and extended the rehearsal period to five weeks. We got rid of ten out of twelves for actors, we saved them a little bit for stage management if they needed it, but we got rid of ten out of twelves. Smudge and Ceremony are now part of our contracts so people know they have access to that as well as other accessibility needs... We’ve given time for people to learn more, but I think it’s an area where we do much more for our staff in what anti-racism work look like and what decolonizing work looks like. We’re still working on getting a third party to sort of Ombudsmen so people have someone they can go to to challenge the power structure...” (#8)

Funders, as noted before, have been asking theatres to articulate their commitment to equity, inclusion, and diversity, with mixed results. Many theatres have struggled to make meaningful change, as an artistic director quoted earlier said, “one or two, you know, somebody here somebody there.” The efforts at proving diversity sometimes descended into box checking, pointing at a play by a BIPOC artist or the number of racialized artists on the stage, without making the structural changes that would change the organisation’s makeup in a substantive way. The events of 2020 led some funders to reinforce the need for theatres to articulate their commitments to equity, as this executive director noted:

“They (a provincial funder) have turned around and said every grant – even if it’s infrastructure – every grant has to be viewed through an EDI lens and what are you doing. EVERY question, every question has to be viewed through an EDI lens.” (#13)

The pandemic and the social justice movement that followed in short order compelled theatres to begin to make change that they had been long avoiding and had been avoiding with good reason. Theatres had been doing things a certain way for so long that even imagining how to begin was daunting. Members of the theatres' communities seized the moment to be heard and told leadership what their experience had been and how they wanted to see it change. In some ways, boards of directors reacted to the pandemics in the way they usually have in the event of a crisis; they identified the problem and took action to address the problem. Often, the action has been to make work for themselves in reviewing and revising policies. The challenge is that a policy is often too late in the process to actually make change. What needs to change is the culture of the place, so that the policy is – as it so often is – a last resort. Organisations need to articulate values that will communicate the expectation of the behaviour of the people within the organisation, so that there are ways to defuse and mediate situations without having to do an end-run to a policy that may appear confrontational or punitive. The conundrum is that change that is not entrenched in policy is not enforceable, but subject to the whim of the leader or leadership, as expressed by this director of operations:

“Institutionalizing progressiveness is kind of a weird... can you write a policy that's about specific matter and yet make it values based rather than saying our policy is we do A, B, C? It's like in this situation – it's conflict of interest or termination or whatever – we say these are the values that we bring into this conversation and it may look like this it may look like that...” (#10)

The professionalization of theatre has meant the creation and adoption of policies, practices, and relationships that are obstacles to change. Both Canadian Actors Equity Association and the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres were founded in the mid '70s to negotiate an agreement to which both parties are signed, dictating fees and working conditions, and prescribing how the work can be done; the Canadian Theatre Agreement (CTA) is over 200 pages long, renegotiated every three years, and never gets shorter. Technical staff started to unionize inside theatre facilities, creating more obstacles to communication, precluding simple conversations that, if had, could avert potential conflicts. Rules about seniority began to take precedence over artistic decisions. Agreements that were ratified decades ago and had undergone only incremental change in the intervening years were in no way flexible enough to adapt to the

new reality of a pandemic-affected, social justice-inflected milieu, and often protected staff who were uninterested or even hostile to the new reality. The social justice movement that swelled in 2020 asked for theatres to articulate their values and then embody them, but theatres seemed to be lost as to how to enact their values without institutionalizing them, without formalizing them as policy.

This board chair who was part of the policy revamp at their theatre expressed frustration about the situation:

“How do you make change when you can’t change the players? How do you make change when you can’t control everything? When you’re still confined by other rules? Like the rules of a union contract. A union contract that secures employment for the people who have been there the longest – stereotypically the people who need to change and also stereotypically the least likely to change. How do you make change when some forever employee behaves badly but not badly enough that you have the contractual ability to do more than have a conversation and put a piece of paper in a file? And then you’re contractually required to deal with the thing quietly – employer to employee because you can’t talk about someone’s bad behaviour out loud?” (#6)

In the case of one of the theatres, policy change made during the past three years is currently being tested in a real-life situation, and the leadership of the theatre is discovering that the policy still favours the status quo, still protects “the people who need to change.” One of the responses to the social justice movement has been that theatres have begun to make a genuine effort to invite more diverse artists into the work. Often, these artists have felt excluded or unwelcome, have not had the opportunities in the larger, resourced theatres, have perhaps been making work in less formal, limited budget situations. Finally given access, they can discover that the institution that excluded them has not made the cultural change to be inclusive, and “bad behaviour” still occurs, making the workplace uncomfortable, or unsafe, or unendurable. The artist follows the rules, the rhetoric of anti-harassment policies, all the way to the policy of last resort, which favours the behaviour that has always existed. If an organisation does not change its culture, then employees have no choice but to follow the customary paths of reporting, that are often cloaked in confidentiality clauses, and a process that is adversarial by its nature. If the

culture does not change to encourage communication, mediation, restorative justice practices, then parties will find themselves in an endgame where someone is put in the position of delivering a judgement about a case.

All but two of the respondents talked about values as part of the change that their organisations have undergone in the past three years. A third of the respondents use the term EDI or JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) in their interviews, as the board chair and executive director of these two theatres do:

“One of our...intentions was to bring JEDI values to how we rebuild the organisation and move to a more collaborative leadership structure” (#12)

“We revised our strategic plan and made EDI its own objective as well as filtering all other objectives through an EDI lens. So, it’s basically become a value right? EDI has become a value.” (#13)

Boards of directors recognize the value of values, and the importance of being perceived to “be on the right side of things,” but they still seem to sense that a commitment to EDI may come at a cost to their theatre, that values and commercial viability are somehow exclusive. One board chair identified the tension between the need to get “bums in seats” and the need to diversify the theatre:

“How do we get stuff that appeals to a broad segment of our community and gets people into the theatre? I would like to think that it’s not either we can appeal to people or we can have diverse voices. I’d love to think there’s a “both and” solution there. That’d be a conversation we’re gonna have to work our way through, but yeah, the whole George Floyd thing, the whole Racial Reckoning, the whole MeToo was happening at the same time. It was like, man, these are potentially existential questions that you know, either you’re gonna do it right and be on the right side of it, or yeah, like I said, to be honest, there was a bit of fear that if we get this wrong, we’re gonna be you know, basically on the sidelines and out of business.” (#9)

4.10 The Path Ahead

The pandemic exposed the disparity between what theatres thought they were doing – their mission and mandate – and what they were actually doing, as well as a lack of clarity about roles in the organisations. As the next three quotes indicate, both Executive Directors and Artistic Directors expressed dismay about the situations they walked into when they took positions at their theatres:

“I started in September 2019. I was under the impression at the time from the Artistic Director and from the board that (the theatre) was fairly far along in their – a word I wouldn’t have used then that I have learned now – decolonization. It didn’t take me long after landing to realise that was categorically false. The board was under this assumption as well and in fact the Artistic Director was too and then you start to dig in a little bit and you see that just because there are Indigenous plays on the stage does not mean at all that you have done any decolonization.” (#4)

“So, the Artistic Director in this organisation, I walked into it believing – was told, and lived by – the idea that the Artistic Director and the Executive Director shared responsibility for the operations of the company. That’s not what actually happens here.” (#8)

The role of the board, I guess it’s called “governance,” we report what’s happening to them, and their job should be, besides oversight, foresight and insight. Right now I suspect it’s a lot of oversight... mission and mandate is what they should be doing. They don’t. (pause) So there’s oversight, that’s an uninformed oversight, and then there’s insight/foresight, which they could actually be better at and I’d value.” (#8)

Board members expressed conflicting views about what the role of the board was supposed to be versus what it was actually doing. While these disparities in understanding of purpose existed before the pandemics, the events of 2020 sometimes magnified them. Both the executive director and the artistic director of this theatre identified what they perceived as shortcomings of their board:

“Some people get on the board because it looks good on a resume, but you have to be passionate about the thing when you dedicate your time. I said, “I think people are on this board for the wrong reasons. You don’t have the right people on the board. They don’t come to shows.” (#7)

“When the board says, ‘we have to go outside of theatre to get somebody good for an Executive Director position,’ that’s a challenge.” (#8)

One of the theatres had begun the work of change before the pandemic. Enrolled in a foundation-funded, multiyear program designed to help theatres identify complex challenges and build adaptive capacity, the theatre articulated its desire to “build reciprocal relationships and embed its values.” The theatre had completed the multiyear program and begun to implement the changes. As the chair of the organisation indicates, the board had been skeptical about the program:

“I mean (laughs) it was serendipitous. That we actually did that program, just prior to COVID. Because it focused us on developing new audiences and just looking at things in a different way. From the standpoint of the social... at the board level, it had zero impact. (pause) Zero impact. I mean to be quite honest, I didn’t think it would turn out as well as it did. Like, I thought it was maybe a little much. I don’t know whether the (pause) benefits were appreciated from the outset. At least certainly from my standpoint. They became clear... clearer later.” (#3)

The pandemics forced a change on theatre in this country. Some of the change may be difficult to step back from. Once an organisation has articulated a desire to be more inclusive, to be more representative of its community, those members who had previously been absent or felt excluded may hold it to account. But the JEDI path – Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion – will require dedicated, ongoing work. It is not just about putting more brown and Black bodies on stages, it is about developing relationships with audiences who may not have seen themselves on those stages before. And the visibility of brown and Black bodies on those stages may challenge the historical audiences who no longer feel it is “their” theatre, who think “their” theatre is pandering, or has become too “political.” If those audiences do not return, with their subscription dollars, or their ability to pay more than \$100 for a single ticket, what will be the effect on the

theatre? This is the question all theatre leaders are grappling with, and the tension between the different leaders about a theatre's priorities is evident in the following quotes from board chairs, executive directors and artistic director:

“We need to figure out how are we creating value for people? And are we creating value that they're going to pay for? 'Cause ultimately at the end of the day, if we're not creating something that people are willing to invest their money into, and their time, and... and be part of, we can be, we can be all sort of high and mighty in our principles and we're changing the world and all that, but if nobody wants to come and see it... we're not changing anything...” (#9)

“Some of our long-term donors are starting to say things like “Why does (theatre) need to be so woke?” And (laughs) and all they mean by that is ‘What are all these Black people doing here?’” (#2)

“Pretty much a quote is, “Maybe this diversity thing should be put on the backburner while we make money when you go back in the theatre.” Now...(sighs) when those things are said, it is really one person, and that one person probably represents a third of the board? I would say not all the board because as he said that, everyone panicked and there was a ripple across the thing...” (#8)

“Change is slow. How do you change when you think you've done all this work and you don't have the authority to follow it all the way through. How do you change when you get partway through and get stopped by something out of your control and then people think you aren't serious about it? You aren't serious about making change. That you're the same old same old. Then does everyone just revert to the old ways? The way you used to be? The expectations they used to have of you? Do they forget they thought you might change? Do we lose our hope? (#6)

“Can you just keep trying even if you can only get half or two-thirds of the way through before you get stuck by the system? And then you just hope that when the holder of seniority leaves that maybe the next person will be different? Will want to change? Will be able to change? When do the jam points in the system stop jamming you. It's so hard to keep the hope... How do you

demonstrate that you're actually still on the path to change? How do you stop the whisper campaign that you're not doing it?" (#6)

The changes that were promised, envisioned during the pandemic seem to be slipping away. Theatres, especially theatres with facilities, continue to attempt to return to a pre-pandemic model, in spite of the fact that audiences are not returning at pre-pandemic levels. COVID continues to mutate and spread, and shows are regularly cancelled due to sickness, creating uncertainty in the audience members who may want to attend the show, and anxiety for theatre managers who cannot afford to lose ticket revenues. The cost of living continues to escalate, making theatregoing seem like a frill or a luxury. All of these challenges are driving theatres to try and return to pre-pandemic behaviour, at the expense of the new reality, as one executive director notes:

"Everyone is back to the same production levels. Beautiful diversity onstage, that's great, but are you doing work as an institution? Are you doing work internally? That can't be a focus if you're doing twenty fucking shows all the time. People take their foot off the gas." (#4)

CHAPTER 5: KEY INSIGHTS

The year 2020 set in motion a reckoning in Canadian theatre, one that continues to the moment of this writing. The insights here are gleaned from the interviews that took place in a four-month period, three years into the pandemic, with people who were in positions of responsibility facing an uncertain future. The violence of the disruption and the timing of these interviews, along with my preexisting relationships with some of the respondents, gave the interviewees the opportunity to pause and assess the events of the previous three years, perhaps for the first time.

I lay these insights out on cards to see if this order is the story that I see emerging, and what do they say about theatre in this moment and theatre in the future?

Key Insight # 1

The pandemic did not cause the crisis in theatre, but exposed and exacerbated the structural and systemic issues that were already there.

Theatres had been steadily losing subscribers for decades, artistic directors were trying to create programming that would woo them back instead of acknowledging that the model was dying. This pandering to the imaginary subscriber was making live theatre less appealing to the younger possible ticket-buyer who might come from a different community but did not see themselves reflected on the stage.

Boards of directors that were trying to recruit more diverse members found it difficult to identify new members, explain the work of the board, and retain new members who found the structure intimidating or disconnected from the work of the theatre. The problem identified by Houle, Ryan, and Chait et al, that boards do not often understand their roles and responsibilities, seems only to have become murkier since the pandemic. In addition to the oversight of the managers, board members now find themselves responsible for ensuring the diversity, health and wellness and work-life balance of their staff, while facing diminishing revenues.

Theatres that were trying to make their theatres more diverse, inclusive, and equitable were still bound by agreements and contracts that privileged those who had been there the longest.

Under-resourcing in conjunction with those agreements and a philosophy of theatre as a calling had created an untenable work-life imbalance for many artists.

Who is responsible for allowing the structural and systemic issues to continue unaddressed? All leadership of theatres knew and acknowledged that the issues existed, but no one seemed able or willing to make the changes that would make theatre once again critical to community. If the purpose of theatre is to work things out in the air in community, the pandemic and the racial reckoning would offer the opportunity for theatre to fulfill that purpose, but the years of drift meant that all players had failed to prepare for the future that arrived. Ultimately, as the literature, the legislation, and the rhetoric says, the board of directors would be held responsible.

Key Insight # 2

Boards of Directors did not grasp a crisis that was not financial in nature.

As noted in the literature, boards of directors are better prepared to address a crisis that is financial in nature; they are often on the board because they have connections to resources, or to people with resources, and they can see how to cut expenses. While the beginning of the pandemic was a financial blow, the actual larger crisis occurred in the months following the arrival of COVID-19. The racial reckoning that began with the death of George Floyd did not end, but rather rippled out to include other movements. Women, LGBTQ+ folk, and Deaf and disabled people joined the chorus of voices demanding accessibility.

The initial crisis that shut down the theatres was one that was experienced by all theatres, and so all theatres were able to focus on the financial ramifications: suspension of programming and therefore ticket revenues; refunds to subscribers or holding those funds in anticipation of reopening; the choice to lay off staff or continue paying them; the appeal to government to help cushion the financial blow.

The second crisis of 2020 that boards of directors were ill-equipped to address had no such clear actions. The racial reckoning precipitated by the murder of George Floyd grew and morphed into a larger social justice movement that challenged all areas of society to examine their own behaviours and complicity in inequity. Most theatres who had examined their rather dismal track record found themselves in an existential crisis. Were they really exclusionary institutions? How did they contribute to a work environment that felt toxic or unsafe? If the harm was unintentional, then the problem was really systemic. Replacing a bad manager will not resolve a systemic issue; replacing an entire system can seem impossible.

In spite of the fact that boards were slow to respond to the societal issues, theatres began and continue to make changes, only to find that the landscape continues to change. The social justice movement that arose in 2020 may in fact have been the apogee, but the backlash against what has been labeled “wokeness” has generated culture wars that divide communities and has led to actions like Saskatchewan’s Bill 137 which prevents children under 16 from changing their names or pronouns at school without parental consent, the Ontario legislature banning keffiyehs, and the Alberta premier musing about how to achieve an ideological “balance” in post-secondary institutions.

This divide will further stress theatres as they try to figure out who they are in a post-pandemic world. While the theatres were shut down, the world changed. Housebound, often separated from loved ones by mandates and health concerns, people stayed connected through the internet. Gathering in person was replaced by gathering in zoom rooms, or other online platforms. Virtually all entertainment was delivered through a screen. People became accustomed to not leaving their homes. The return to large gatherings was slow and peppered with super-spreader events.

Meanwhile, larger societal changes were underway. The economy continues to be a factor. Relief measures that kept businesses afloat during the pandemic ceased, and the need to repay government loans made during that time is sinking many businesses, contributing to public nervousness about spending. Food prices are high, housing is unaffordable or unavailable.

Climate breakdown events have moved that issue higher on the public agenda. All these factors seem to have made Canadians more protective of their personal resources, whether they be time, goods, or money.

As Turbide and Laurin documented in their 2014 study, boards of directors are most comfortable dealing with financial crises. The backlash against “wokeness” may actually give boards of directors the rationale to step back from their commitments to EDI and allow them to return to the relative comfort of making decisions based primarily on financial considerations. One of the things the social justice movement exposed was just how few BIPOC leaders there were in Canadian theatres, how few administrators and technicians, how few board members. Efforts to remedy this deficit over the four years since the pandemic began have exposed how difficult it is to make the changes that will make all areas of theatre safe and welcoming for all, and more to the point, how expensive. The precarious state of theatre may seem like justification for boards of directors to once again focus on the financial, to put costly EDI initiatives “on the backburner while we make money,” to (try to) program well-known crowd-pleasers that will sell tickets, once again excluding the diverse population they were trying to court.

Key Insight # 3

Structures are in place that will retard structural transformation.

Theatres are signed to a number of agreements with the associations and unions to which actors, technicians, designers and other creators belong. Many of these agreements dictate how the work can be made, assuming a hierarchy that theatres may actually be attempting to dismantle. For example, a group of artists may want to work in an Indigenous way, collaboratively, in circle. The Canadian Actors Equity Association demands that there is an artist whose title is Director, and that artist be paid more than the other creators on the project. Hours are often prescribed in these agreements, and any adjustment to the prescription – shorter days over an extended period of time, for instance – can be prohibitively expensive.

The associations and unions are themselves being called to account about their memberships and their histories, and so they are doing their own internal reviews and trying to answer their critics by recruiting more people of colour, more women, more Indigenous folk while at the same time striving to not concede any gains made over their decades of existence. Like theatres, many of these organisations are resisting structural change, making working together even more complicated.

Ownership or stewardship of a facility further complicates the possibility of transformation. There are hard costs associated with a facility; the heat must be kept on, the mortgage and the taxes must be paid. During the pandemic, artists were released and contracts cancelled, but the bills associated with theatre facilities continued to be paid. Some theatres, in response to the loss of subscribers during the pandemic, are working to make their facilities community hubs, places where citizens meet and work at any time, not just in the half hour before a show. This small change, if successful, can make theatre critical to a community, but it will require more financial and human resources, as well as the acquiescence of the board.

While the board of directors is not the only piece of the governance puzzle – “governance is a function and a board is a structure” – it is a structure that was created to allow the receiving of public funds. Created in and for an era, the model remains the same as the time in which it was established, even though the world has undergone and continues to undergo dramatic change. The governance model that is prescribed by law keeps the board of directors in charge, with the power to veto programming, budgets, hires, and any number of other things, depending on the by-laws of the organisation, the strength of the chair, the knowledge of the members, etc., but it does not give them the power to change their own structure. The moment for theatres to be “agile, flexible and responsive” (McMullin and Raggo) seems to have passed. Theatres made small adjustments, based on what was practical and possible in the moment, but as Atkinson has noted, a “status quo bias” supports the tendency to follow customary policies, to do things the way we have always done them.

The professionalization of theatre over the decades has led to theatres becoming more like each other, adopting the same structures, the same policies, the same programming, and the same

audiences. This homogeneity is the antithesis of change, and an obstacle to the change demanded by the events of 2020. The communities that called theatres to account are diverse, and theatres have made public commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion, to anti-racism, and to amplifying voices that have been silenced or absent. The same communities may be holding the theatres accountable, or perhaps if they perceive that the theatres are unwilling or unable to change, they will give up on the idea of theatre and abandon the field completely.

Many areas of society have managed to make changes that have diversified their work forces and improved their workplace culture, and yet theatre does not seem able to make the same kind of changes. Even if the players have a genuine desire to make change, they find themselves “stuck by the system” and stymied by the structures that have been adopted by their theatres. One can’t “institutionalize progressiveness” but leaders are finding the path to changing the culture arduous. If they have not got the ability to work things out in the air in the small, enclosed community of their theatre, what hope do they have of doing so in and for the larger community?

Key Insight # 4

Theatres will not be able to undo the changes they have made, and those changes have costs.

The changes that were sought for a long time finally materialized. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives became de rigueur, an attempt was made to program plays more reflective of the community, administrations began to create more humane schedules. Many of these changes have been embraced by the various communities of the theatres and it will be difficult to step back from them, given that the theatres articulated an accountability to these communities. But each of these initiatives have costs associated with them; more diverse casts often mean increased travel and accommodation, shorter work weeks will mean longer rehearsal periods, increased accessibility will mean less expensive ticket prices which will result in lower revenues.

Theatres will be lobbying for more public support to make up the shortfall, and funders who have been insisting that theatres be more representative of their communities may be unwilling to

commit more funding to organisations that are stepping back from EDI initiatives, gender parity, or Canadian work. At the same time, audiences are not returning to theatres in pre-pandemic numbers, volunteers are aging and not being replaced, costs continue to rise, and many foundations and funders are refocusing their priorities, which may exacerbate an already financially tenuous situation.

Key Insight # 5

The model is not the problem per se, the people are the problem, but if the model is susceptible to the wrong people, then the model is the problem.

The board of directors in and of itself is not the problem. As Cornforth pointed out, the functions of governance are often carried out by “managers, members and advisory groups,” who carry out their share of the work according to the articulated mission and mandate of the theatre. But the articulation of that vision, the interpretation of the mission and the mandate, is the purview of the artistic director, and its execution trickles down to the other members of the theatre’s community. The board of directors, according to the model to which most non-profit theatres adhere, is responsible for the selection and appointment of that leader; once that leader is in the place, the board must occupy itself with other work. If the board has made a good hire, and trusts the leader, this work can be largely receiving reports from the managers, and ensuring that the board is accountable to itself and to its community. Many boards commit much time and many resources to identifying, recruiting, and developing the right people for the board. As the zeitgeist changes, the definition of “right people” changes, but the model does not, and the new people who are recruited find they are not comfortable, or not engaged, or do not feel valued on the board, and so depart. The model privileges certain people – those who have served on boards, those who have more personal resources that allow them to volunteer time, those who are connected to networks – creating a kind of “elite” who are more likely to agree to serve and to stay, perpetuating the status quo. Even when the board wants to make change, even after the accountability check of 2020, they often find they are “still kind of operating in this paradigm of how we always operated.”

Much of the literature around nonprofit governance is prescriptive, declaring what constitutes a good board, and laying out the rules for developing one. Many scholars have argued that the one-size-fits-all approach to board development in fact fits very few and does not take into account the specific circumstances of the organisation. In fact, the board development process is about depersonalizing the relationship between the directors and the organisation, reducing people to their professions, their cultural communities, their genders, or their networks. This depersonalization further distances those responsible for the oversight of a theatre from its purpose.

Key Insight # 6

Most organisations are making change, but they are largely stopgap measures, or incremental changes, and not the deep, broad, and significant reimagining necessary to transform the industry. In addition, the desire to return to a pre-pandemic “normal,” especially amongst board members, is strong.

Even as the world continues to change, many theatres are doubling down on the old model, courting subscribers with seasons that lean heavily on crowd-pleasers, while subscriptions continue to decrease and crowd-pleasers make theatres more and more irrelevant. If the purpose of theatre is to work things out in the air in community, how does a steady diet of musicals⁶ create conversation amongst citizens about the world in which we currently live?

This story has a kind of circularity to it. Pre-pandemic, leadership knew that their theatres faced a host of structural and systemic issues that would have to be addressed, eventually. The pandemic and the racial reckoning that happened during that time exposed those issues in a very public way, and pointed at the model that had allowed the issues to continue and become institutionalized. Theatres that were forced to articulate how they would address the issues began to realise that the model is flawed, and small and incremental changes they undertook only

⁶ For example, major Canadian theatre just announced its season: five musicals, including two jukebox musicals about Celine Dion and Leonard Cohen. Another crowd-pleaser, *The Sound of Music*, the 1959 musical by Rodgers and Hammerstein about nuns and Nazis, continues to be produced across Canada with productions in three provinces in the 23/24 season, and more productions in other provinces in 24/25.

further illuminated the flaws in the model. Each small change led to another challenge, and as the challenges accrued, leadership began to actually see the size and scope of the problems. The revolutionary change that some of us had hoped for and imagined did not materialize.

But as Campbell asserts, “revolutionary change or punctuated equilibrium consists of simultaneous change across most, if not all, dimensions of an institution over a given period of time” (Campbell, p. 32), and theatres are too interwoven with too many institutions – from funders to legislation – for simultaneous change. And so, a few steps were taken, small and incremental, and the pull of the status quo tempts many of the leaders of the theatres across the country to postpone the hard work, paper over the structural and systemic issues, and hope that they can ride out the change agenda. We may have missed our opportunity to drive the change, and so the change that happens to us may be more painful and, sadly, more foreseeable than was necessary.

CHAPTER 6: BRAVE NEW WORLD

I returned to school out of a desire to investigate the non-profit governance model under which most theatres operate, and to attempt to discover if this was indeed the only model that would work for reasons of accountability. While I was in school, the theatre world underwent a massive accountability check, and the precise thing I was examining was tested very publicly, and in real time.

Even as I write this, the accountability check continues. The war, begun when Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, has had reverberations in Canadian culture. A production of a play called *The Runner* by Canadian theatre artist Christopher Morris was cancelled after the presenting Belfry Theatre was the target of protesters who claimed the play was racist and anti-Palestinian. Across the Georgia Strait, the PuSh Festival in Vancouver which initially stood by its decision to present the show, has now capitulated to protesters who pressured not only the Festival but the other participants who had been programmed, demanding that they withdraw their own shows in protest.

These are the new realities of theatre-making in this country. Theatres struggling to entice audiences back into their houses are caught between a rock and a hard place. If they choose to offer programming that speaks to the times we are in, they risk alienating an audience that craves escapist entertainment, or being targeted for programming plays that are perceived as anti- or pro- some political stance. Choosing to program “safe” work runs the risk of being perceived as pandering or commercial or irrelevant by the public funders, or further estranging audience members who hunger for challenging work that engenders discussion in public fora.

All of this is happening while theatres struggle to find, recruit, and develop new board members. Theatres that do not know how they fit in the new world will have an even harder time identifying the people whom they think should be in charge of governing. The mission, mandate and objectives of a theatre have always been subject to interpretation by the people who have accepted the fiduciary responsibility of serving on the board of directors. If a theatre is struggling with its role in its community, who it places in charge of overseeing it may further destabilize it

or drive it in a different direction. A risk averse board may direct the theatre's managers to choose lighter fare, or money-makers (and boards of directors do still generally approve both the programming and the budget of the theatres they serve). A board that is not really engaged in the work of the theatre, a rubber-stamp board, or a board that must be managed to even make its bylaw-prescribed number of meetings will be of little or no help to a theatre that may find itself in a *Runner*-like controversy.⁷

I was recently approached by a managing editor of a magazine that focuses on governance, who wanted to interview me about what kind of governance model would work for the arts. I had to tell him that I did not have a definitive answer. My colleagues across the country who have supported me throughout my research keep asking me the same question. I came to school to try and understand what was hobbling this practice to which I have devoted much of my life, and whether there was a way to help it achieve what I perceive to be its purpose. The answers I found do not inspire hope in me. The further I dig, the more wicked the problem appears to be. The structures that theatres have adopted to survive have formed a cage around the thing that was the art. The bureaucratization of the theatre threatens to kill the very thing it was created to serve. Sometimes I think that our failure to seize the moment, to do our job of working things out in the air with a community, spells the end of this model of theatre, and perhaps that end is deserved. As Hamlet says about the end of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "why man, they did make love to this employment."

The challenges that theatres face are bigger than just governance, although how theatres meet those challenges will certainly be impacted by what decisions boards of directors take in next few years.

The biggest challenge theatres face and will face in the near future is adjusting to their new resource reality. There is just less of everything. Less money, fewer humans who are willing to part with their smaller dollars, fewer theatre workers willing to work under less than optimal

⁷ This kind of cultural policing is not limited to plays like *The Runner*. A recent production of *Sisters*, a 1989 play by Wendy Lill, was cancelled because of protests that there were no Indigenous actors in the cast. There were no Indigenous actors in the cast because there are no indigenous roles; the play is about the non-Indigenous nuns who ran a residential school and their grappling with their role in the creation and maintenance of the system.

circumstances. Not only are audiences diminishing, so are the contributions of sponsors, donors, and foundations, many of whom have shifted their focus to support social justice issues, Indigenous priorities, youth, newcomers, and climate change.

Ironically, the smaller, less-resourced theatres may be in a better position to adapt to the new reality. Rarely well-supported by sponsors and donors because their small box office numbers did not offer the kind of exposure that would justify a large donation, smaller theatres have been working much closer to within their means. Their audiences are often in relationship with the theatre because of an affinity with the mission, as with ethnoculturally-mandated (ECM) theatres like Native Earth or Cahoots Theatre, and so they are less likely to abandon the company. The smaller theatres tend not to have their own venues, and so have fewer overhead costs.

Further, the Canada Council for the Arts has given notice that theatres can no longer expect to receive the same level of funding they have historically received but must be prepared to make the case anew for how they are fulfilling their mission and mandate, serving their communities, reflecting their population. If there is indeed a leveling of the playing field, large organisations that have been accustomed to receiving substantial funding, perhaps only 2 or 5 or 10 percent, but still amounting to hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars, may find that their funding has been reallocated to smaller, “diverse” companies, for whom the bump in funding will make a huge difference. But this will require courage to implement and fortitude to withstand the outrage and fury that such a reallocation of resources would generate from many of the theatres who have come to expect a certain level of funding because they have always received it.

The move away from expensive tickets to a Pay-What-You-Wish model is one step towards both diversifying audience and a more authentic relationship between theatres and communities. Moving away from a consumer model to one that privileges inquiry may be the best way of proving a theatre’s value in its community. How many theatres will be able to adjust their budgeting, programming, and marketing quickly enough to keep their theatres afloat remains to be seen.

Ultimately, theatre will have to figure out what its actual work is heading into the future. Is it to entertain? To offer the masses spectacle and relief from the challenges of life? If so, how does a theatre convince a fearful and risk averse population to leave their homes and gather in a public place with their fellow citizens? What will a citizen be willing to pay for that experience?

If the work of the theatre is to provide a reason and a space to gather, what will entice the same fearful and risk averse citizenry to leave their homes to be with their fellow citizens? Are there conversations that theatres can facilitate that will be so critical to people that they feel they must be a part of them? And once again, what will someone be willing to pay for that experience?

If people are not willing, or able, to pay admission for theatre – whether entertainment or edification – what is the model that will allow the form to continue? If theatre is offered for “free,” where do the revenues to pay artists, build scenery, maintain the facility come from?

Consider the spectacles that are “free.” Pride Parade in Toronto is an annual event that is “free” for thousands of people, but it is underwritten by numerous funders and sponsors, many of whom want to show their alignment with and support for a community that is once again increasingly threatened. Further, Pride is supported by a massive army of volunteers, including all the organizing committees, the participating groups who march or provide a float, and of course the directors.

In Saskatoon, SUM Theatre has for 10 years presented Theatre In The Park in parks all around Saskatoon (and in recent years, in Regina, Prince Albert, LaRonge, and Rosetown). Over the course of ten years, over 50,000 people saw ten shows from *Alice in Wonderland* to Indigenous stories about everything from climate change to living together peacefully. Again, the “free” event has been paid for by government funders, sponsors, community associations, and a variety of people who believe in the philosophy that theatre can build community.

If the future of Canadian theatre lies in being in true relationship with a community, then scale will become an important consideration. Theatres will have to find ways to be in real conversations with their communities, about the work, about the world; a newsletter to a

subscriber base is not a relationship. Marketing will have to be relinquished for outreach and engagement, relationships built over time that are not transactional. The management of a theatre will need to commit more time to their constituency, whether sitting in circles with them and talking about the philosophy of the theatre and the process by which plays are chosen or leaving the building and going out to community events, not to market a production, but to genuinely be with the members of the community.

This kind of re-imagining will necessitate a concomitant restructuring of the organisation. If the theatre re-imagines its work as being in relationship with its community, the output of theatre production may be much reduced. Any re-structuring will affect the means the theatre has to do the work. All of these decisions will have ramifications on all aspects of the theatre, including the directors who are responsible for the oversight of the theatre. This kind of re-imagining will require a process that includes staff, directors, managers, artists, members of the audience, and will ultimately need to be approved by the board in order to be effected.

Many theatres, many arts organisations, in fact, have been working to create parallel systems of governance that they find more suitable for their particular organisation. Advisory committees, community circles, artists advisories, are all attempts to create a governance system that is in relationship with the work, one that is perhaps more reciprocal, more sustained, and more sustaining than the one that currently exists. The challenge is that these parallel accountability mechanisms create more work for already overextended staff, and in the event of a crisis, can be dismissed in favour of the official board of directors.

6.1 Future Research, Further Questions

The world continues to change, and theatre will adapt to those changes. Climate breakdown, the cost of living, social justice movements, and events as yet unforeseeable will present new challenges to theatres in the immediate and not-too-distant future. Here are a number of directions in which theatre might be heading, and the concomitant areas for future research.

6.1.1 Partnerships

As the traditional revenue streams shrink, theatres will begin to seek out non-traditional partnerships to support the development and production of new work. Examples of these cross-sector partnerships include:

- In 2008, Ontario Victim Services funded a tour of a play created by Native Earth Performing Arts to schools in the Greater Toronto Area and southern Ontario. The play, *Savage*, was commissioned by a high school in Fort Frances to address issues of homophobia, poverty, and racism;
- A verbatim piece begun in the inner-city neighbourhood of Pleasant Hill is currently being developed into a rap opera, supported by the City of Saskatoon, various foundations, businesses, and social service agencies.

These kinds of partnerships are not about marketing, but about a recognition of the power of theatre to make change in a community. In the United States in 1934, the federal government established the Federal Workers Theatre which served the dual purpose of employing artists and educating the population about the issues the government believed important. The program was ended in 1939, but it is often credited with leading to the creation of the regional theatres across the country.

In Canada, there are the opportunities for more partnership models to be explored. Museums have theatre facilities which are woefully underused. Most new public buildings, like libraries, have theatres as part of the design. In Toronto, two theatres have begun building rehearsal, performance, and office space on the lower floors of a building that provides non-profit housing for people most at risk for homelessness.

Toronto's decades-long experiment with arts partnerships, Artscape, recently ended with the organisation going into receivership. For 30 years, Artscape undertook to provide arts, culture and community spaces, buying or leasing buildings, creating live/work spaces, cultural hubs that housed arts groups and presenting or performing spaces, and affordable housing for artists, and at the time of its receivership, was operating 14 spaces. In the six months since, two new non-profit

organisations – Artscape Non-Profit Homes Inc. (ANPHI) and ArtsHubs Toronto Inc. have emerged to help save both the housing and community cultural hubs.

Some theatres have been working to position themselves as community assets, making partnerships, both formal and informal, with their immediate communities. In Armstrong, BC, the Caravan Farm Theatre sits on 80 acres of land that has in recent years offered space for evacuees from fire, and as a muster space for emergency. In Toronto, Soulpepper Theatre has opened its lobby to its neighbours, offering free wi-fi and operating a coffee bar, creating a gathering space where people can meet and work.

The for-profit theatre section can also be a partner in the production of Canadian theatre. Mirvish Productions, the Toronto-based commercial theatre, has picked up shows that were developed in the non-profit theatre sector, giving them access to larger audiences. While Mirvish does not develop new Canadian work, its four venues make it possible for new Canadian work to step up to a larger venue.

As theatres make innovative partnerships with business and industry, this area will become a fruitful one for research.

6.1.2 Platforms

There are several examples of platforms that have been created to maximize resources. In Saskatoon, a group of artists started a platform called Live Five, which provides limited infrastructure for five independent shows each season. The platform offers technical support, box office, and marketing, relieving the pressure on individual artists to do all the tasks of producing. In Toronto, an organisation established in 1992 called the Small Theatre Administration Facility (STAF) offered administrative support, from grantwriting to the issuing of contracts to bookkeeping to script printing, to a number of small independent theatres. The challenge of the platform model is the cost of the service. In 2014, STAF was reimagined as Generator, changing its focus from support to capacity building in small independent theatre producers. In the case of Live Five, the work is done by a volunteer board of directors, themselves independent artists,

who become overextended and burn out. In the case of STAF, there is much more need than capacity to support, and like all theatres whose resources are dwindling, they can no longer afford to pay for their share of the platform.

Still, as the landscape changes, theatres and artists may find ways to work together to share resources in a more effective way that serves all the participants.

6.1.3 Change of governmental priorities

A change in government can prove devastating to public support for the arts. In England, funding cuts to Arts Council England (ACE) began with the election of a Conservative government in 2010. The 30% cut at that time affected all arts organisations, from art galleries and museums to symphonies and opera companies. A 2024 study commissioned by Equity (Britain’s performing arts association) found that since 2017, funding from national arts councils (England, Northern Ireland, Wales, and Creative Scotland) has fallen by 16% in real terms. Further, the government that has historically maintained arms-length relationship to funding decisions has in recent years become more controlling and directive; an initiative to “level up” – redirect more resources to communities outside London – will force certain companies to move. Some companies have had their regular funding cut, but been offered support to relocate to an underserved community. The English National Opera, founded in London in 1931, lost its ACE funding, and has announced it is moving its headquarters to Manchester. Further, in January of 2024, ACE issued a warning to grantsholding organisations to be aware of the risk that making statements about current political situations might pose to their funding, creating an instant backlash in the arts communities.

Both the United States and Canada are headed into federal elections that could result in conservative governments that may be hostile to public support for the arts. After an initial bump in funding in 2010, funding for the Canada Council for the Arts has been flatlined. Provincial arts councils are similarly grappling with years of flatlined budgets, trying to support more artists who – like all Canadians – are facing rising costs.

In any event, changing governments will have changing priorities, and this area will be one in which to conduct further research.

6.1.4 Small, Independent Theatres

I have suggested that the future of the theatre in Canada is in the small, independent theatre companies. The way they respond to the challenges of the next decade, how they partner, gather resources, create new work, and engage with communities will be worthy of research. At the same time, the qualities that allow these companies to adapt to an evolving landscape may make doing research on them challenging; small companies with less infrastructure have less capacity to commit to the surveys, interviews, focus groups and other tools of data collection.

6.2 Final Thoughts

The events of 2020 gave theatre an opportunity to pause and consider its role and purpose in society. The world that shut down in March 2020 is not the world that exists now, and it seems unlikely that we will ever return to that “normal.” Nevertheless, organisations that have begun the work of imagining alternate models of theatre making, developing relationship with community, and considering to whom they are accountable and for what may be in a much stronger position to meet whatever happens next in this brave new world.

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APPENDIX A: NOMENCLATURE

Artistic Director – often referred to as the AD; the manager largely responsible for programming choices; could also be called the Artistic Producer, the General Director, or another title

BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, Person of Colour; at a certain point in the pandemic, some people began to refer to IBPOC to acknowledge Indigenous folk first

CAEA – Canadian Actors Equity Association, the professional association of many actors, directors, choreographers and stage managers

CTA – Canadian Theatre Agreement to which both PACT theatres and CAEA are signed, which dictates the working conditions and fees for CAEA members

Diverse – a catch-all term to mean everyone who does not fit into the dominant culture; usually non-White, but could also be code for disabled, Deaf, trans, neurodivergent, LGBTQ2S+, etc.

ECM – Ethnoculturally Mandated, referring to theatres like Obsidian which showcases Black theatre artists, and Native Earth Performing Arts which is committed to the development of Indigenous theatre

EDI – Equity Diversity Inclusion; the current term for (amongst other things) policies to address and awareness of non-White, non-mainstream culture

General Manager – often referred to as the GM; the manager largely responsible for administration of the theater; could also be called the Executive Director, CEO, or another title

Inclusive – like “diverse,” a catch-all term to acknowledge the dominant culture’s recognition of its dominance

JEDI – Justice Equity Diversity Inclusion

KPI’s – Key Performance Indicators

LGBTQ2S+ - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, 2-spirit, and more

PACT – Professional Association of Canadian Theatres, the membership organisation to which many (but not all) theatres belong, which negotiates the Canadian Theatre Agreement (CTA) with Canadian Actors Equity Association (CAEA), which dictates the working conditions for actors, directors, stage managers, etc.

Racial reckoning – the accountability check, or calling out, that happened after the murder of George Floyd

Ten out of twelves – the technical days in theatre that are twelve hours long with two, hour long meal breaks, as prescribed by the CTA