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Reimagine  
and Rebuild  
Prairie Theatre

*Community-led Conversations for Theatre Artists,  
Researchers & Sector Leaders*

**PROJECT REPORT**

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# ABOUT FUTURE PRAIRIE THEATRE

A community-led research and innovation project about the prairie theatre sector.

The research engaged racially diverse independent professional artists, administrators, researchers, and different theatre companies to better understand the challenges within the theatre sector in Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan with the goal of identifying sustainable initiatives to address the issues.

As constellating research to the Re-imagine and Rebuild Conversations, the SSHRC-funded “Critical Uncertainties and Future Scenarios of Prairie-based Theatre” housed out of the University of Calgary, and the Centre for Socially Engaged Theatre (C-SET) University of Regina, will be part of this process and extend into a multi-year path to build on current findings and utilize strategic foresight for future work.

# OVERVIEW

## REIMAGINE & REBUILD PRAIRIE THEATRE - COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

The Future Prairie Theatre project was a series of community-centered conversations focused on the need to reimagine and rebuild the prairie theatre sector in a pandemic world. These conversations took place over Zoom through a series of 10 gatherings from October 2021 to March 2022 and were attended by thirty-three participants per session on the average. Our work was to reflect on the past, the present, and lean into the pull of the future - all in the context of making theatre on the prairies.

Each Zoom session was 2 hours. It was structured into two halves with a small break in-between. At each half we investigated a pre-prepared question in small break out groups and reported back to the whole group. The intention of the sessions was to engage community in an ethical way, to collectively reflect on and think about the past and present conditions of both the artist and the sector, and envision ways to tackle the issues going forward. We broadly grouped the critical themes and topics that emerged in these sessions into the following categories: **Retention of artists on the prairies; Mentorship; Community; and Access(ibility).**

The reports presented here are simply communicating thoughts from the community. They are not prescriptive and definitive. Participants have been de-identified. Also, the reports attempt to present the tone and the intention of the conversations. In some sessions, the group moved quickly across different topics, never landing on a final synthesis, but surfacing the complexity of these issues. Finally, while the reports themselves are not summative, one of the major topics that consistently emerged was the need for consistent and stable funding for arts and artists on the prairies. We hope these reports can be used by different stakeholders in the sector in endeavours that move the sector forward.

# RETENTION

## RETENTION OF ARTISTS & PRACTITIONERS ON THE PRAIRIES

We posed the question: *Why do artists leave the prairies?* One participant challenged this question with: *Why do artists stay on the prairies?* This quickly became a productive and exciting counterpoint for our conversation. The participants observed that artists stay on the prairies due to family ties, connection to the land, and long-time residence. Some participants spoke of the years of training received on the prairies which led them to build and develop their own theatre companies. Factors that influenced the exodus included lack of access to advanced training, inadequate resources, shrunken artistic communities, and harsh weather conditions. Despite these factors that impact quality of life, some participants stated they were comfortable with the modest living and the sense of community that is prevalent on the prairies. One of the participants stated that “individuals are not here [on the prairies] to do better, but they are here to just do their thing”.

Doing “their thing” was identified as an issue for other practitioners who wanted more out of the prairies such as access to meaningful work that offers room for empowerment. Also, one of the participants mentioned that some individuals have left, tried to establish themselves in big cities, but could not secure consistent work due to the density of theatre practitioners and high competition in those urban centres.

Furthermore, lack of inclusiveness and mentorship were raised as factors influencing theatre practitioners’ decisions to leave. Specifically, lack of opportunity for the Black, Indigenous, People of Colour, and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities were mentioned. Other factors include the conservative political environment and limited access to funding.

Although everyone acknowledged the funding is essential, it did not, however, constitute a major reason why artists decided to stay on or leave the prairies. Some participants expressed dissatisfaction over the seemingly disproportionate amount of funding available to bigger companies in the urban centres. From these discussions, it was identified that those that have remained are mostly either small

to mid-sized theatre companies or individuals focusing on small-scale projects which do not require huge funding to execute. It was noted that a baseline support system, such as a Universal Basic Income (UBI), could have an impact on the future retention of artists on the prairies.

To achieve artist retention, funding for the arts in general, including resources required to learn the necessary professional skills needed to apply for grants was considered essential and should include artists engaging in community-based art projects. Noteworthy was a remark by one of the participants who felt that opportunities must be greater and “magical” for individuals to stay. Although this participant felt these opportunities are presently difficult to come by, another participant suggested giving individuals mid-level opportunities would be crucial to the future of the sector. This included advocating for a shift in work distribution from one big theatre company, to spreading resources across small and medium-sized theatre companies. It was noted that a change of policy and governance culture would be necessary in order to properly implement and to support the needed change in resource and opportunity re-distribution.

With regards to audiences, expanding repertoire and engaging new demographics of audiences, could lead to better retention. Challenging the colonial structures, hiring directors or artists who are passionate about departing from the Western theatre traditions could also contribute to accessing new audiences. Addressing changes in programming and outreach, one participant raised the following questions for consideration.

“How do we know the audience will reject something that's very different or unique? How can we involve them in something very different? If they like what they see elsewhere, how can we implement that here?”

A hopeful reflection on the nature of audience and programming from one of the participants was expressed in the chatbox: "Do not miss the opportunity to talk and reflect on where you are, if we are looking at other places then we are missing the opportunity to reflect in the place you are living in and to tell the stories of where you are living.”

# MENTORSHIP

## MENTORSHIP ON THE PRAIRIES

Mentorship emerged as a topic of great concern among both emerging and established artists. We asked our participants: *What is mentoring? What does mentoring mean to you?* One participant likened providing mentorship to emerging artists as providing a “baby box” (something you might receive at a baby shower) filled with knowledge about the theatre economy. It was also mentioned that many artists needed mentorship that was tailored to their lived experience. For example, several commented on the importance of partnering disabled, BIPOC, or 2SLGTBQIA+ mentors and mentees together. Some artists felt that it was essential to be intentional about creating agreements and a formalized, structured approach to mentorship. Other artists felt that informal mentorship has been very impactful in their lives. Young and emerging artists especially expressed a hunger for access to mentoring within the prairie theatre ecosystem. Established artists discussed the need for a symbiotic relationship between mentors and mentees. True mentoring, they noted (and deemed “Radical Mentorship”), has a reciprocal exchange of knowledge so that both parties are learning together and from each other.

Other responses to this question included:

- ▶ Mentoring is advice
- ▶ Mentoring is professional guidance
- ▶ Mentorship is helping someone and meeting them where they are at
- ▶ Mentorship is encouragement, collaboration and respect.
- ▶ Mentoring is relational and empathetic

The stakes of mentor/mentee relationships was something that participants were also curious about. While asking for mentorship was likened to feeling like a marriage proposal, some artists felt that the responsibilities of being a mentee could be overwhelming. It was mentioned again how a formalized process could help them shape, contain and ultimately find agreeable endings to mentor relationships. The agency of mentees and mentors was a consistent priority among participants. Some participants shared negative experiences with mentorship - circumstances where there were misunderstandings on what the mentor/mentee relationship actually was. This led to conversation about what mentorship *is* and what it *is not*. For example,

artists felt that boundaries were an absolute necessity in mentoring relationships. It was also agreed that there were limits to what mentors can do, both personally and ethically. Examples were brought forward that mentorship should not be counselling, or texts at 2am! Artists also talked about how the word “mentorship” has been co-opted by corporations. The group was curious about the difference between mentorship and internships and wondered if the co-opting of the word mentorship led to emerging artists to seek mentoring when in fact what they wanted or needed was paid internships.

Further, we asked participants “*what are the existing mentoring paradigms on the prairies?*” Some of the existing mentoring paradigms mentioned included:

- ▶ Rosza
- ▶ RISER
- ▶ Creative Manitoba
- ▶ Assistantships
- ▶ SATP
- ▶ RMTC
- ▶ On Cue Performance Hub
- ▶ Azimuth
- ▶ Thesis Supervisors
- ▶ On the job training
- ▶ Ignite
- ▶ Live Five
- ▶ One Yellow Rabbit
- ▶ Edmonton Fringe

Financial support and access to resources was mentioned as a necessity for effective and sustained mentorship. The complexity of whether a mentor should be paid for their work or not was also raised. Many reiterated the need for more government support and measurements of how to gauge success of a mentorship initiative.

Overall, the general consensus was that if done “right”, all artists, regardless of experience can benefit from mentorship.



# COMMUNITY

## THE TERM ‘COMMUNITY’ AND ITS COMPLEXITY

The topic of ‘community’ as a broad-based term, came up in every conversation, and seemed to be a type of shared touchstone, or gathering principle that everyone understood in one form or another. When we paused, however, and asked ourselves what specifically was the definition of this term, ‘community’ the answers were not straightforward. Thus, we dedicated a number of sessions to identifying, unpacking and clarifying this ubiquitous concept of “community” and discovered it is a powerful word with multiple meanings.

The first breakout session we simply asked the groups to identify and acknowledge the different communities that are in the prairies and to which they belong. We delved into the learnings and meanings that can be derived from the categorization of these communities. Below is a cross section of represented communities with which participants identified:

- ▶ Indigenous
- ▶ Academics
- ▶ Immigrants
- ▶ Newcomers
- ▶ Nerd
- ▶ Emerging artist
- ▶ Neurodivergent
- ▶ Mental illness
- ▶ Yoruba community
- ▶ Asian
- ▶ White
- ▶ Refugees
- ▶ Agricultural
- ▶ Black community
- ▶ Femme
- ▶ British settlers
- ▶ Funders
- ▶ Rider fans
- ▶ Activist
- ▶ Women
- ▶ Teaching
- ▶ Ukrainian
- ▶ 2SLGBTQIA+
- ▶ Trauma Survivor
- ▶ Atheist
- ▶ Fandom
- ▶ Sports
- ▶ Parents
- ▶ Indie theatre Producers
- ▶ Artists
- ▶ Urban first nations
- ▶ Disabled artists/activist
- ▶ Theatre community
- ▶ Religious
- ▶ Chinese community

The act of naming and articulating these ‘communities’ quickly led participants to realize how broad *and* specific communities can be. This, likewise, elicited a feeling of burden for some participants of having to place oneself in a community due to how they identify, and the perceived obligations associated with that identity. A potent question arose: *due to historical inequities, which communities are requiring more attention and care?*

In the context of theatre what does community mean? Who is our community? Are audiences part of our community? What communities *claim* us? What communities do

we *claim*? Furthermore, how do our political ecosystems and ethos shape community? For example, the current presence of the conservative government in Saskatchewan was cited as a reason for theatre makers leaving the prairies. One participant feared that funding would disappear due to the government seeing the art 'community' as contravening conservative ideology.

While it was acknowledged that major theatres seem to have their own gravitational pull on their audience community, it was noted that the pandemic helped smaller companies move beyond physical borders, as they expanded their audience beyond the prairies thanks to digital platforms. These platforms offered the opportunity for communities to intersect and collaborate across geographies, cultures and time.

A series of observations emerged around the nature of community. Some participants expressed pride, specifically as members of the Deaf and Disability Arts community which is rooted in celebrating difference. Another mentioned a sense of validation when they discovered their mixed heritage was named on a government application form. Another participant observed that there is always a feeling of being part of a community *and* not being part of it at the same time. Communities can be both safe and/or oppressive. Finally, a participant observed there is a direct relationship between financial security and growing a community. From the strength of feeling in the group, it was clear that identifying with a community is complex.

# ACCESS(IBILITY)

## ACCESS(IBILITY) IN PRAIRIE THEATRE

To frame our conversation on access(ibility) we posed this prompt: *“In the year 2042 theatre on the prairies are considered highly accessible to many communities because...”*. One participant said that this is a goal that actually might take twenty years, and they noted the complexity of access(ibility) and the structures of oppression that must be removed. Some of the aspirations that were surfaced in response to this prompt included:

- ▶ **Diversity and access** are linked.
- ▶ **Universal Design Theory** becomes popular.
- ▶ Theatre is **financially viable**.
- ▶ There is **accessible transport** within urban centres and between urban and rural communities.

To further respond to this prompt, we queried, *“What is access? What isn’t? Prairie theatre is currently accessible to who? Who gives access?”*. The discussion unpacked how access has different definitions and facets– it could have multiple implications such as financial, familial, physical, and mental. However, many participants agreed that “access is the process of giving space”. Other thoughts include:

- ▶ Theatre can be made more accessible through **language and translations**
- ▶ **Working with the community and implementing small steps** and continual improvements are essential.
- ▶ **Good communication and exchange** are necessary for access.
- ▶ Structural and programming shifts are required for physical and neurodivergent access

When discussing what access is *not*, one participant shared their exhausting experience with having to ask for access; they noted that if someone is forced to ask for access, part of it has already been taken away.

Participants observed that in our current theatre prairie ecosystem, a lack of access and accessibility are barriers for both artists and audiences in creating theatre and/or in attending performances. Additionally, it was noted that there is a particular

need for accessibility for those who live in rural settings on the prairies. There are many rural communities that might not have spaces to make or see shows; travel time and accessible transportation to urban centres are barriers.

Surprisingly COVID-19 changed this dynamic for the artistic community. For instance, a participant mentioned how one of the byproducts of the pandemic was that companies found ways to adapt and create new opportunities over digital platforms. Theatre became *more accessible* to many people - people with mobility issues, without access to transport, or with financial barriers to name a few. However, this new digital access also posed its own challenges. Digital theatre barriers include lack of internet or reliable networks, as well as technological obstacles for visually or physically impaired. Despite this, participants recognized this digital access as a movement that must continue as we slowly move into a post-pandemic world.

Furthermore, the participants discussed the effects of access(ibility) through the lens of colonization. It was agreed that there is an urgent need to decolonize theatre structures and systems, especially when making theatre on Indigenous lands.

Finally, as a group, the discussion focused on consciousness around access, that is, creating awareness of how individuals can claim rights to access and ways institutions can help create access.

# CONTACT INFORMATION

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## RESOURCE LIST

A living document that contains information of different organizations that offer legal, emotional and counselling needs on the prairies. Here's the link  
[bit.ly/2ZZjij8](https://bit.ly/2ZZjij8)



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