

STRATEGIC FORESIGHT AND THE FUTURE OF PRAIRIE-BASED THEATRE

The future we can't see is unattainable.

AUTHORS:

Christine Brubaker, Taiwo Afolabi, Yvette Nolan,
Jessica Thornton, and Heather Russek



NOVEMBER 2022

INTRODUCTION

Future Prairie Theatre (FPT) is a team of theatre researchers and practitioners who are taking a multi-pronged and multi-year approach to engaging theatre artists and theatre institutions about the future of the sector on the Canadian prairies (Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba). Anchored in the values of relationality, responsibility, and accountability, and with a place-based commitment, FPT is dedicated to working with diverse stakeholders to help the sector meet current challenges and to envision and collectively create a preferred future.

Researchers, Dr. Taiwo Afolabi (URegina), Professor Christine Brubaker (UCalgary) and artist/scholar Yvette Nolan convene independent theatre artists, theatre companies, funding organizations and governing bodies through conversation and workshops to strengthen the interprovincial connections and forge a regional identity. The research team works within both the academy and the profession and has a deep investment in facilitating a collaboration within the sector for a healthy, equitable and thriving prairie-theatre ecosystem.

Our current work includes two streams of activities: **Re-imagine & Re-build Prairie Theatre (R&R)** and **Future Scenarios for Prairie-based Theatre (FSPT)**. The streams, while mutually informing, have independent goals. R&R was an open-call set of community conversations that helped surface values and concerns in the sector. FSPT furthers and deepens this work by engaging invited participants to tackle specific issues through different modalities. We have completed two phases of the work to date. Phase 1 involved the R&R community conversations in tandem with focussed training in strategic foresight for the research team. Phase 2 invited participants to envision and articulate a preferred future through this strategic foresight methodology.



PHASE 1

RE-IMAGINE & RE-BUILD PRAIRIE-BASED THEATRE (R&R)

R&R was an open-call, community-based series of conversations with prairie-based theatre makers on issues of social justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Funded by provincial arts organizations, theatre companies and the Canada Council for the Arts, the intent was to invite a shift within the sector by laying a foundation for community-based thinking through the surfacing of shared values and concerns, and in the process, strengthen the potential to address these issues.

From September 2021 to March 2022, 36 artists from across the prairie provinces engaged in 20 hours of conversations over Zoom. Through these voluntary sessions, the research team forged relationships with artistic leaders from the community, within and outside the established institutions. Together we discussed and distilled current concerns specific to the theatre-making on the prairies and identified four main priorities that are critical to the health and sustainability of our sector: Retention, Mentorship, Community and Access(ibility). This phase is summarized in [this report](#).



STRATEGIC FORESIGHT & FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR PRAIRIE-BASED THEATRE

In tandem with our R&R community gatherings, the research team, Taiwo, Christine and Yvette, with graduate students Cali Sproule (MFA UCalgary) and Ibukun Fasunhan (Phd URegina) worked with Jessica Thornton and Heather Russek, co-presidents of **Creative Futures Studio (CFS)**, an organization dedicated to using strategic foresight (SF) to address planning in the face of uncertainty. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “Strategic foresight is a structured and systematic way of using ideas about the future to anticipate and better prepare for change. It is about exploring different plausible futures that could arise, and the opportunities and challenges they could present. We then use those ideas to make better decisions and act now.”¹

SF has been used widely in the corporate and governmental spheres, but to date, has only had limited use in the theatre sector.² It was this area of opportunity that excited the research team: Could this tool provide a meaningful way for the sector to make sense of the huge uncertainties coming out of the global pandemic? Could it provide new directions in the face of the climate crisis, and the political and economic upheaval? Could it strengthen a community that was in many ways facing an existential crisis?

With the support from a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight Development Grant, the research team undertook training with Creative Futures Studio in strategic foresight with a goal of bringing this work to the prairie-theatre sector. Over ten months, the team immersed itself in horizon

¹ OECD. “What is Strategic Foresight?” <https://www.oecd.org/strategic-foresight/>

² Christopher Leveille’s 2019 masters thesis statement for OCAD Graduate program in Strategic Foresight and Innovation, “Aaaand Scene: Moving Towards a Future for the Independent Theatre Landscape in Toronto”, is one of the only references to theatre and strategic foresight that this team could locate.

scanning, signal gathering (which included community perspectives gathered through the R&R process), trend analysis and systems thinking. We held monthly scan clubs - meetings where we shared the signals of change (weak, emerging and mature) we derived from news stories, social media, conversations etc. from local, national and global sources. We analyzed the signals to identify trends that would directly affect our sector.



Finally, we developed four future scenarios of what theatre might look like on the prairies in 2040. These scenarios contained all the seeds of our signals and trends, the positive and the negative, the distressing and the hopeful. These scenarios were neither dystopian or utopian but were designed to provoke and activate thinking and discourse about what might lie ahead - what outcomes we wanted to avoid and what we absolutely wanted to work towards. To further develop these scenarios, we invited participants from the R&R conversations to describe "a day in the life" of theatre makers in each version of 2040. This contribution became a vital and grounding component of each scenario.





PHASE 2

WORKSHOPPING THE FUTURE OF PRAIRIE-BASED THEATRE WITH STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

In September of 2022, the research team with Thornton and Russek invited 20 participants from our original R&R conversations to help us dive deeper into these scenarios. These individuals were ones who had shown a strong interest and commitment to furthering these conversations. We invited fifteen others to ensure we included a range of voices from all three provinces, specifically prioritizing equity-owed communities. It is important to note that not everyone we invited could participate. The timing of this workshop occurred during the traditional opening of the theatre season. Many individuals, particularly those in leadership positions in numerous theatre companies were not able to attend. We are planning to engage many of these important voices in the coming months to reflect on this report and our findings.

PREPARATION

Prior to the actual SF workshop, the research team and CFS met to curate a meaningful and thought-provoking process for the participants. Considering the amount of time the participants would be spending on Zoom and the nature of the questions we would be working through together, we knew that it would be crucial to provide our group context in advance as well as ensuring times for breaks and opportunities for one to one connection. Based on the four scenarios listed above, our graduate student teams designed 'packages from the future' - small object prompts, mailed in advance to the participants which would provide a tactile gateway for everyone to connect to the ideas.



PACKAGES FROM THE FUTURE

ITEM 1

A choice between a tea bag and a pill to manage anxiety.. The tea is made from a special mixture of various herbs from the gardens outside the theatre.



ITEM 2

A few seeds and a barter ticket because it can be hard to find food and water sometimes. These can be used to trade with other community members for whatever participants need - whether it is a meal or food supplies or something else.



PRAIRIE IDENTITY CARD

Name _____

Year of Birth _____

Gender _____

Ancestry _____

Place of Residence _____

Years of Residence _____

Abilities/Skillset _____

IF FOUND, PLEASE RETURN TO PRAIRIE NATION

ITEM 3

A Prairie identity card to keep close by during this civil war, and used to obtain food, government benefits and to cross borders to the east and west.

ITEM 4

A letter telling participants that they have been approved to receive the Quarterly Artist Grant that they requested in response to the GovGo grant application.

PRAIRIE NATION

LETTER OF CONGRATULATIONS

Dear Applicant,

Congratulations! We are pleased to say that your *Quarterly Artist Grant* has been approved! You will receive an automated deposit in your account within 1-2 weeks. Upon receiving your grant, please provide a report on your use of funds at your leisure.

We wish you all the luck.

Sincerely,

Prairie Arts Council
(204) 123 - 1234

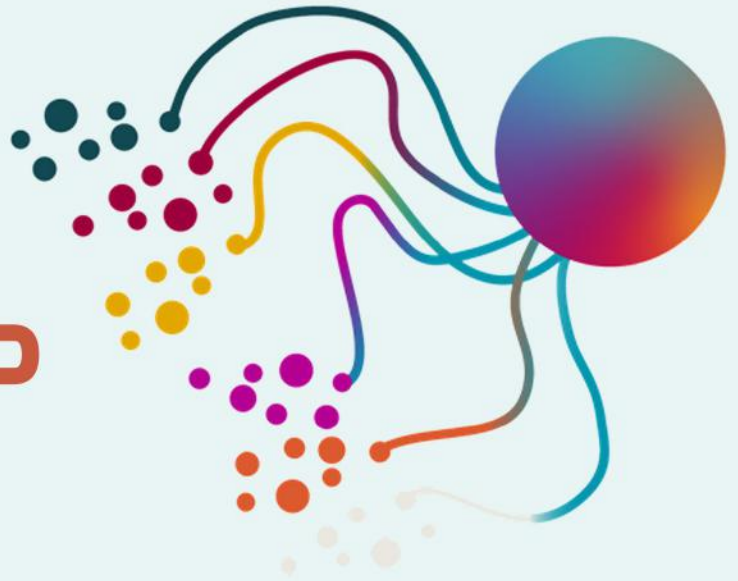


DESCRIPTION

The strategic foresight sessions were held virtually over Zoom in four, three-hour sessions spread out over four days. The process began by exploring the four scenarios through role-playing. Each of the researchers and CFS performed the 'part' of a theatre-maker in 2040 (playwright, stage manager, artistic director and actor) - literally a monologue in that character's voice. The outcome was surprisingly effective. Participants felt themselves drawn in, intrigued and activated by these scenarios. The participants asked questions of this character, probing and interrogating about the circumstances of this world in the future. This process required the researchers and CFS to combine improvisation and emergent scenario development, blending the craft of strategic foresight and performance.

The next two sessions resembled more typical workshops where in smaller groups, participants identified aspects and characteristics of each of the scenarios that aligned with a shared preferable future. We then collectively began to draft a shared vision statement for prairie-based theatre in 2040. The final session involved everyone reflecting on the 2040 vision statement, identifying tangible near and long-term actions that would be needed to advance this vision, prioritizing these actions and naming the key stakeholders needed for the vision to become a reality. The workshop concluded with reflection about the process and with an invitation to participants to share their own responsibility and commitment to enacting the 2040 vision.

WORKSHOP FINDINGS



With the acknowledgement that the work we engaged in was nuanced and complex, the following summation of ideas that emerged, describing the future state of 2040:

- Prairie-based theatre is responsible to the past and future;
- Prairie-based theatre is decolonizing;
- Prairie-based theatre is climate-positive, regenerative and place-based;
- Prairie-based performing artists and theatre-makers are supported;
- Prairie-based audiences are supported; and,
- Prairie-based theatre brings value to its community

In essence, in 2040 theatre on the Canadian Prairies is essential, supported by the government, governance is flexible and all stakeholders are responsible to the environment and their communities.

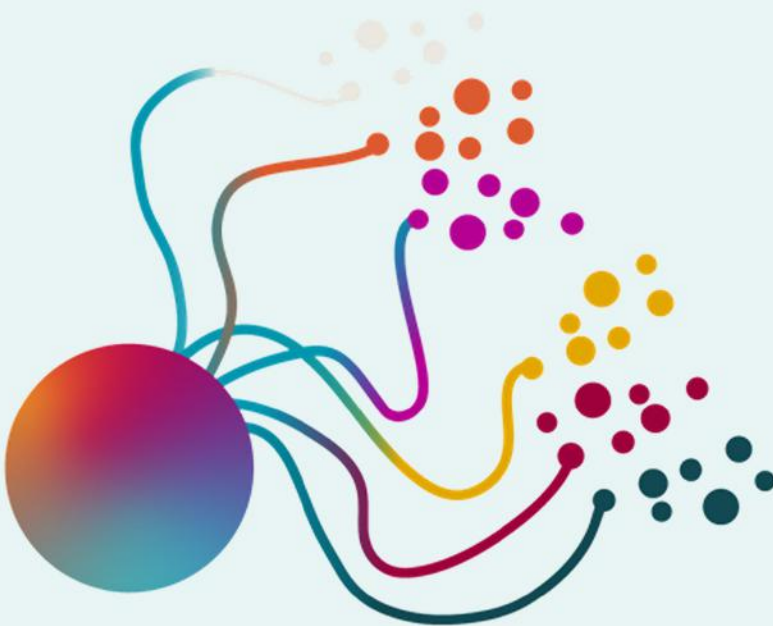
Based on this future vision, participants identified a range of actions, including:

- Creating a prairie caucus and support for interprovincial collaborations among theatre makers
- Evolving the process of making theatre so it supports well-being of participants, including
 - Work-life balance
 - Five day work weeks
 - Longer rehearsal periods
- Advocating government to implement better public services such as childcare, education, healthcare, universal basic income to support the community

- Advocating government to implement better public services such as childcare, education, healthcare, universal basic income to support the community
- Expanding theatre making education to early childhood, high school and beyond
- Supporting intergenerational and interprovincial mentorship to support emerging artists to create a thriving ecosystem of prairie-based talent.

Beyond this, there were dozens more actions identified, but there was not broad alignment of priorities, suggesting more work is needed to clarify collective responsibilities.

Overall, the use of strategic foresight was deemed useful by participants. Some commented that it helped unlock their ability to understand a future prairie-based theatre identity. Others commented that the scenarios made them deeply uncomfortable, allowing them to better understand what they would prefer in the future. One participant noted that they did not know they had strong opinions about the future of prairie-based theatre until participating in the process. Overall, many commented that the process left them feeling energized and hopeful about the future of theatre.





RESEARCH DISCOVERIES AND DIRECTIONS

Through the SF process, we were able to collectively identify the changes that needed to happen in the broad sense; we do, however, recognize that these changes identified were a reflection of who was at the table and that there may be a gap given who was not. Our immediate actionables focussed on the individual and how we could each facilitate change within the sphere of our influence in the now and near futures. It was clear, however, that the overarching and larger work must continue.

This work reminded us and reinforced our understanding of the interconnectedness of the issues and structures that require change. For example, governance is incomplete without funding, work/life balance and contracts require a deep engagement with unions, and any change to the funding system would necessitate change in government legislation, etc. These issues are inextricably linked to our broader societal culture and our theatre-making culture. For the desired future to become a reality, we would need to undertake holistic, robust and comprehensive solutions. One might anticipate that the interconnectedness would be overwhelming, but surprisingly, it was this sharp focus on the larger systemic issues that activated hope because this future vision for our sector was shared.

This work helped us surface the questions and research paths to address the systemic changes needed in our sector. We collectively deliberated on and articulated a shared imagined future and identified key actionable items (short, near and far term) that could expedite that future. Although the scope of change is vast, it is not unachievable. It is this gleam of hope that inspired participants to identify areas for opportunity for growth and strengthening in the prairie-theatre sector, and allowed participants to engage with community to identify who could bring thought leadership and vision to this deeper process.

THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS & SPONSOR



Partners:



Sponsor:



Social Sciences and
Humanities Research
Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches
en sciences humaines
du Canada

Canada



PROJECT TEAM



CHRISTINE BRUBAKER
Principal Investigator
Facilitator



TAIWO AFOLABI
Co-Investigator
Facilitator



YVETTE NOLAN
Project Team
Facilitator



JESSICA THORNTON
Creative Futures
Facilitator



HEATHER RUSSEK
Creative Futures
Facilitator



IBUKUN FASUNHAN
Research Assistant
Notetaker



CALI SPROULE
Research Assistant
Notetaker



STEVEN CONDE
Research Assistant
Notetaker



ERIN MACKEY
Tech Support