



Carousel Theatre for Young People Community Conversations Report

Executive Summary

In June 2021, Carousel Theatre for Young People (CTYP) embarked on a community survey to receive feedback on the future vision of CTYP. Based on the survey, there were four key themes that emerged and were the basis for three community conversations in July 2021. These key themes included: Innovative opportunities for artistic productions, types of innovative programs to provide, identifying priorities to engage in post pandemic, and how to build bridges with the community through accountability.

There were a number of participants including board members, community members, artists, management, and staff that provided recommendations for consideration. Highlights included:

1. Confirming the vision for CTYP's board and management to understand the organization's core business. This will support the direction of productions and programming to align with the appropriate vision and to know how it aligns with other focused organizations (i.e., Children's festivals, storytelling, teen programming, school programming).
2. Increase innovative programming through participation in festivals, leverage school shows based on teachings of history and curriculum, enhance diversity of productions, engage youth to make the programming more youth centric through a youth council, and enable mini-series of productions to make productions more accessible and inclusive of diverse stories.
3. Partnering with school boards on key priorities of focus identified for students post pandemic such as mental health and first people's perspectives, providing full spectrum programming to include artistry on the entire production, providing a cost structure that is affordable for individuals, and continuing to increase accessibility and inclusivity to programming for kids and patrons of all abilities.
4. Investment in leadership and staff with regular performance reviews, time off for professional development, implementation of professional conduct and equitable workplace policies, reducing the pressures on staff and artists with rehearsal times and check-ins, and incorporation of whistleblower protection for safe disclosure.
5. Continuous community participation through regular open mic/townhall conversations and incorporation of collaboration through indigenous reconciliation.
6. Review of governance model for the Board to enhance artistic community connection and diversity of the members on the Board.

These recommendations have been provided to the Board. The current and incoming Board will work with the new Co-Artistic and Managing Directors, staff, and artists to support the forward vision of the organization.

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Introduction

In June 2021, Carousel Theatre for Young People (CTYP) embarked on a survey to receive recommendations from the community on the future vision of the organization. From the survey, four key themes emerged:

1. **Innovative Productions** – The community identified many innovative opportunities to enhance the artistic direction of productions including representation of diverse individuals in these productions. As such, the first community conversation focused on validating what we have heard from stakeholders on types of productions and discussing are opportunities for CTYP.
2. **Innovative Programming** – There was also feedback in the survey focusing on the desires to have different levels of performing arts programs for children and teens, as well as mentorship opportunities for emerging artists. The second community conversation validated the types of programs to offer and potential segments of participants.
3. **Engaging on priorities post pandemic** – Many patrons and participants missed the deeper connection to CTYP’s programming during the pandemic. Combined with the second community conversation, the intent of the conversation was to identify opportunities of priorities to increase active participation of in theatre arts and create excitement back in our youth.
4. **Building Bridges in Accountability** – It was clear in every response, that there are opportunities to build policies and processes that focus on performance management, safe disclosure, and board and leadership accountabilities. The final community conversation focused on understanding what policies and processes to implement that supports both perspectives of employees and leadership.

Four virtual sessions were planned and allowed for a maximum capacity of 25 participants per session (100 individuals in total). However, due to the low number of registrants, the second and third sessions were consolidated into one session.

Shafana Mitha, Principal of aKollage Consulting Inc. moderated each of the three sessions with a supporting moderator, Rebecca Lee present at the third session.

Each conversation brought excellent recommendations for the board’s consideration.

The timing and participation at the sessions was as follows:

Theme	Date	# Participants
1: Innovative Productions	Saturday, July 24, 2021 12:00 PM to 1:00 PM Pacific Standard Time	5 Community 1 Board Member 4 Staff
2: Innovative Programming and Engaging on Priorities Post Pandemic	Saturday, July 24, 2021 3:00 PM to 4:00 PM Pacific Standard Time	4 Community 1 Board Member 3 Staff
3: Building Bridges in Accountability	Monday, July 26, 2021 7:00 PM to 8:00 PM Pacific Standard Time	13 Community 4 Board Members 5 Staff

Two individuals also reached out separately from the session to provide their personal concerns and recommendations.

Session 1 Recommendations for Consideration (Theme 1)

The first session focused on opportunities for innovative productions. We began by discussing the main points of the feedback received to set the context as identified in Figure 1.

Figure 1: What we Heard on Innovative Productions



There was consensus on the conversation that CTYP should first confirm what their role or vision is within the TYA sector:

Is CTYP in Arts Education or Education through Art – both would have very different outcomes in terms of what that means for innovative production and programming focus areas.

General Feedback from participants

- Organization should identify what the biggest moneymakers have been (i.e., Holiday show, Elephant and Piggy, Charlie Brown) that have name recognition, and use the successes to support shows that have less name recognition so that CTYP has a balance of both.
- Need more musical-based shows.
- Make it less about the Artistic Director and more about dialogue and inclusion of diverse voices.

- Understand what drove the initial creation of the company in the form and content of what was provided (i.e., Form being euro-centric to short stories and using content from the vision of the audience)

Festivals

- Important to focus on teaching about the craft of theatre and everything that comes through it. In addition, CTYP should have more participation in festivals for young people.

Schools

- Opportunities to leverage school shows based on teachings of history and curriculum.
- Fill gaps with solutions for school curriculum and apply for grants to fill the void.
- Work with Education or Art Start to support with grants.

Diverse Productions

- Opportunities to open up from Euro centric productions to be inclusive of other voices/artists/stories out there that CTYP can tap into to represent stories of:
 - Black history in British Columbia/Canada
 - First Nations/Indigenous Voices
 - Dance
 - Persian, Philippian, South Asian, and other voices to bring awareness of diverse styles of productions and stories to the general public.
- Members of the Theatre Community pointed out that their Eurocentric ways of depicting a well told story, however diverse cultures have many different ways to tell stories including stories with puppetry, dance, one person shows, memoires each bringing light and magic.
- Opportunities for more inclusive gender expression – tap into in a meaningful way so that children feel represented without it being a topic of the play (i.e., Representation built in a character that is gender diverse, representing their perspectives without being the focal point or problem within the play).

Youth Centric

- Use the students you have as a youth council or focus group to tell CTYP what they would like to see rather than adults creating what they feel is an important story.
- Look at intersectionality to bring stories based on the population base of the students so that they can see themselves reflected. (I.e., Little Shrimp incorporated Cantonese and Cantonese speaking youth felt represented with a sense of pride).

New opportunities

- Aesop's Fables – have a mini-series throughout the year (monthly) which is more accessible with lower costs, possibility of streaming the performance so that it is more accessible (both from a cost perspective and location), and people can purchase passes for the series.
- Acknowledge barriers we have overcome by increasing digital media and offering a hybrid model.
 - Build on successes of the Artists in Residency - Invited diverse artists as a collective. Three lead artists with a co-lead for each. Built a completely new team and gave more control over the productions.

Session 2 Recommendations for Consideration (Theme 2 and 3)

The next session began by discussing what resonated with the recommendations that came from Session 1 and then took a deeper dive into innovative programming and opportunities to leverage post pandemic. To set the context, the conversation also went through the findings from the survey, which is included in Figure 2.

Figure 2: What we Heard on Innovative Programs to Support Post Pandemic Recovery



What resonated with the group from the previous conversation was that innovative programs need to be:

- More Youth Centric – by engaging and consulting with young people,
- Less about one person’s vision,
- Increase school partnerships, and
- Creating greater focus on offerings for teenagers that are in Grades 5-12

CTYP will also need to identify what lane to work within given the lanes that other organizations are focusing on.

- Is it Children’s festivals, storytelling, Teen programming (such as Green Thumb), or youth driven arts festivals such as Cultch Theatre’s Ignite?
- Should the focus for CTYP be on theatre for elementary kids?
- Based on that focus, then CTYP can employ individuals accordingly (i.e., for younger non-professional focus, employ individuals in early 20’s to emerging artists).

School partnerships

Coming out of the pandemic, the school boards and BC Education will be focusing on two key aspects this year, which benefits the organization to incorporate into the programming:

1. Mental Health
 2. First People's Perspectives
- Participants of the third session also identified that there are opportunities to build ambassador programs into schools.

Full Spectrum Programming

Programming opportunities should include artistry on the entire spectrum of productions so that individuals who are not aspiring producers or actors can also see themselves in theatre including set design, production, writing, technical, etc.

- Those that are on the technical team would have never imagined themselves in this career path. Setting the stage for these types of careers so that all kids can see themselves within theatre.

Cost Structure

- The recommendation from participants was to ensure access and affordability of shows and programs. This includes ability for individuals to provide donations of ticket sales for students or school attendance.
- Leverage those shows that are high revenue generators for schools/families that normally are not able to access theatre due to the cost structure.
- The third recommendation identified allowing for sliding scale ticket options.

Accessibility and inclusivity

- Continue with options for relaxed performances for children of all ages and abilities, American Sign Language (ASL) performances.
- Increase use of diverse languages in drama school classes, programs, and marketing materials.

Session 3 Recommendations for Consideration (Theme 4)

The third session primarily focused on the recommendations provided from the survey on building bridges to work better together. These recommendations stemmed from the significant impacts that resulted from the departure of the previous Artistic and Managing Director and opportunities for CTYP to incorporate policies, processes, and regular engagement to ensure equity and accountability in senior leadership and within the board. Figure 3 outlines the key areas identified with the survey.

Figure 3: What we heard to build bridges through accountability.



It is important to note that there were individuals that felt that there were no issues in Carousel and enjoyed working with the organization until the departure of the previous Artistic and Managing Director. Their main issue was that the polarized views brought significant negativity and bullying in social media, which continue to persist from all sides/perspectives.

Feedback received from the community conversation identified the importance of getting the audience involved in the process, building policies and processes, increasing community participation, refocusing board governance, and creation of supports for staff and artists.

Policies

- Incorporate policies for regular performance reviews.
 - Have 360-degree feedback with appropriate structures and policies to support individuals based on feedback received including development/capacity building opportunities, discussions with the board, grievance ability, etc.
- Increase mentorship/guide as a program.
- Invest in staff to support development with time off. Too often organizations are asking people to invest in themselves and not supported by the organization financially or with time.
- Incorporate an Equitable workplace policy, which would include an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy; inclusive language in job postings; and the delivery of programs/productions.
- Have a professional conduct policy and vision that everyone enters into.

Community participation

- Recommendation provided around PuSh Theatre's experiences in moving away from the colonial standard of performance excellence and increasing more community focused theatre.
- Need more opportunities like this conversation, which has a "You Talk, and We Listen" focus.
- Host an annual event with an open Mic and a neutral emcee (externally facilitated) to hear from community and assess what was a massive success and where did we fall short.
- Look at what indigenous reconciliation looks like – bringing through a lens of changes and indigenize in small matters in how we connect, acknowledge land, and engage elders respectfully.

Governance

- Enabling CTYP to be community governed – increasing participation of board members that are from theatre community and understand the needs of all stakeholders.
- Currently there is more of a corporate governance model, which may not be appropriate for governance of artistic communities.
- Provide a structure to enable an artistic advisory council that provides checks and balances for the theatre to the board and enables continuous conversations directly with the board.
- Challenge structure in how we govern through community – opportunity to consult with trained facilitators on conflict resolution or have a commitment to explore another route if community feels the board is not making strides.
- Increase diversity within the Board.

Staff and Artist supports

- Making sure that staff experiences a world of avenues where there is greater consultation as a team and that staff have discussions with management and each other.
- Staff and Artists are both having different experiences, and both have lots of pressure of time and schedules. It is important to check in with each other regularly and maintain accountability.
- Recommend having advisory mentors – to help those that are feeling pressures to sink or swim as a life preserver.
 - Have mid-week of first rehearsal check-ins from someone that is outside of the production to provide artists support.
 - Make rehearsal period longer.
- Create a master group of support for similar roles as an accountability within the organization. It was noted that Vancouver theatre community also needs to build greater supports in a similar way.
- Enable “Whistleblower protection” and opportunities for a safe disclosure process – individuals noted that is in the works within the community, however safe disclosure should also ensure that appropriate accountability policies are in place so that people can continue to learn and build skill sets and capacity for leadership.

- GVPTA – working on anti-oppression workshop and training certificate in addition to an anonymous whistleblower protection project that CTYP can leverage.
- Incorporate due process for investigations that result from grievances and whistleblowers.
- Leverage learnings from ADC Designer’s group where they have looked at organizational needs to provide a safe space.
- How do we change outside advocacy groups as people especially if people are experiencing oppression and all the pressures of theatre?
 - As an organization have a policy or strategy on how you want to change as a system to remove racism, sexism, transphobia and enablism.

Next Steps

It is important to note that amidst the community conversations, CTYP is also in the process of recruiting to two Co-Artistic and Managing Director positions. It is recommended that the feedback received from the survey and from the community conversations be shared with the new leadership in addition to regular conversations with the Board to assess opportunities they can together implement to build trust and bridges within the community of artists, staff, patrons, and colleagues across theatre. In addition, it is recommended that the board assess the governance recommendations when recruiting to new board members in the future.

One additional step in building this trust is transparency. It is recommended that the board and senior leadership have ongoing conversations within the team of staff and artists that are currently supporting CTYP in addition to sharing the report with the community at large on CTYP’s website.

As a facilitator who is an external consultant, I would like to add that it has been a privilege and pleasure connecting with the Board, staff at CTYP, artists and broader community with the survey and community conversations. I appreciated the trust and openness of the participants to bring forward-thinking recommendations back to CTYP to enable a strong, diverse, and highly engaged community, centred around young artists.