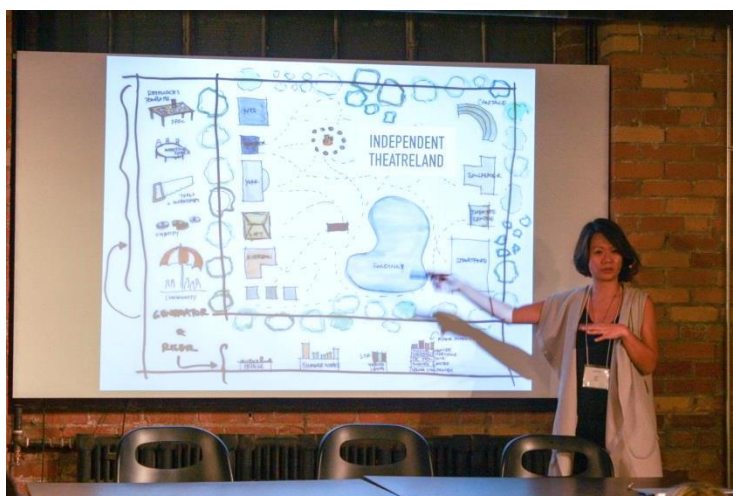


Responding to *Generator* and *The RISER Project*: Sector developers for independent theatre in Toronto

On October 27, members of the independent theatre community in Toronto, in conjunction with representatives from Toronto Arts Foundation, the Metcalf Foundation and Toronto Arts Council gathered at the Centre for Social Innovation to discuss topics essential to the sector's current evolution and development.

Central to this discussion was the launch of a new [report](#) on sector change, authored by Helen Yung of the Culture of Cities Centre. In the report, Yung explored case studies of two local ventures – Generator and The RISER Project – which both empower small companies and individual artists through resource and skills sharing.

After a presentation of the report's key findings, event participants (including theatre artists, funders and administrators) investigated current issues within the sector via a series of small group discussions. Topics included building audiences, planning succession, creating artistic independence, measuring impact and fostering hope. What follows is a summary of the ideas expressed in these discussions.



Researcher Helen Yung presents the report to members of the performing arts community at the Centre for Social Innovation

MEASURING IMPACT

This conversation questioned the use of numbers to quantify impact when reporting to funders and donors. The usefulness of this metric was examined given the shared purpose of The RISER Project and Generator, which is to work with and invest in building capacity for small groups and individuals - something that cannot always be quantified in numbers.

One participant stated that qualitative, as well as quantitative measures should be used when examining impact. This could likely only be measured longitudinally, or over a period of time. Qualitative measures would look at: work/life balance; the ability to achieve professional and creative goals; and audience connection.

A critique of traditional evaluation systems followed. First, data collection methods are not necessarily tailored to this sector. In the performing arts sector, success factors are often determined by the satisfactory building of relationships, which is often hard to evaluate quantitatively. However, one participant added that investment in a given individual can in fact be traced over time.



Breakout group, led by Katie Leamen, Director of Coordination & Communications, Generator, discusses the challenges and opportunities when measuring impact

It was clear to the group that organizations needed to develop their own evaluation matrices: an organization's own measures of success should be determined by its particular mission and mandate. A good way of posing the question to an organization might be: *"what is your impact in relation to your mission?"*

On the topic of funding, some participants wondered how committed funders were to funding art that was highly explorative in nature. Because such art does not (at least initially) reach large numbers of audiences, it was stated: *"in the relationships between society, art and funders, it would be wise to look at impact indicators rather than impact numbers."* They felt it would be interesting to investigate a given process over years and then assess its impact indicators. It was also agreed that data analysis succeeds or fails on the strength of its storytelling power.

Top three takeaways

- ✓ We need to find effective and relevant impact indicators;
- ✓ Cultivating good relationships and networks is important; and
- ✓ We need to find new ways to merge storytelling with data analysis.

BUILDING AUDIENCES

This conversation dealt with the challenge of building audiences, one faced by many small theatre companies. In order to do this, the group first attempted to create a map, or visual representation of what “audienceland” looked like. Who lives there, what characteristics define them, how engaged are they?

The idea of a map was soon abandoned, and the group elected to simply identify and write down a series of “audience groups.” They decided to include potential theatre audiences as a whole, rather than drilling down to a definition of “independent” theatre audiences.

To start the conversation, the group discussed facts they know. One participant cited a survey conducted by Shakespeare in the Ruff. This indicated that the company’s audience included representation from all demographics, including retirees and young professionals. A 2013 TAPA report revealed that one in five audience members are between 18 and 35 years old. It was also noted that fellow artists attend theatre productions.



Breakout group, led by Owais Lightwala, Managing Director, Why Not Theatre, discusses the challenge of building audiences

Several barriers to theatre attendance were discussed. These included time, travel, parking, childcare, insufficient choice and the need to plan ahead. The group wondered whether, in today’s fast-paced world, theatre was considered too boring by some. In an era where entertainment consumers are increasingly accustomed to controlling the viewing experience, participants wondered about how they might continue to command audience attention: unlike Netflix, audiences cannot simply turn a theatrical performance on and off at will.

Other factors that could affect attendance were considered. Theatre patrons might have been “burned” by a bad theatrical experience, and hesitated to return. Some might have been triggered by a show with uncomfortable subject matter; however, all agreed that challenging work must continue to be produced, despite the risk that it might make audiences uncomfortable. The perception of value was a consideration; is a one-person show less rewarding than a musical, or a show where a great deal has been spent on the set and cast?



One participant noted that outdoor theatre is well received and can be a gateway to other theatrical experiences. Theatre in parks is generally a free or low-cost experience that does not require too much planning ahead. Pay-what-you-can shows also offer these qualities to audiences.

Top three takeaways

- ✓ Building audiences means building relationships over time. It requires a sense of trust;
- ✓ Risks must be taken, but time, money and challenges must always be considered; and
- ✓ The question of what constitutes entertainment for audiences must be examined.

TYOLOGIES OF INDEPENDENCE

In this discussion, the Generator/RISER model was hailed for providing theatrical creators with a sense of independence. *“Give a woman a fish and she eats for a day, teach her to fish and she eats for life”* is a good analogy for the model. Among the things participants have realized is that the usual theatrical hierarchy (general manager/artistic director etc.) could be reimaged.

The group felt that the sector is in flux, and that *“the space in the middle is holding more and more people.”* As the sector shifts, sharing has become a major point of discussion. However, the resource sharing discussion is not new – in fact it started about 15 years ago. Bigger companies have many resources (wardrobe, props, photocopiers, spaces), that they can share with independent companies. Yet the research paper points out that resource sharing benefits big companies as much as it does small ones. It helps with mission fulfillment, for one thing.

It was noted that The RISER Project allowed for the inclusion of alternate economic models for resource sharing, so that it would not exacerbate the class divide of participating artists. Transparency is seen as another factor in these projects: it clarifies where money does and can come from, and gives participants the opportunity to hustle more strategically.



Breakout group, led by Kristina Lemieux, Executive Director, Generator, discusses pathways to independence

One major point in this talk was that, as artists become their own producers, art is necessarily commodified. Yet artists often feel divided between the entrepreneurial and bohemian aspects of their art. They do not want to stop developing and growing artistically because they were refused a grant. They want to walk the line between economic viability and artistic success. The RISER Project and Generator were commended for giving *“the space to develop your relationship to your art without the pressure to learn how to commodify it for the benefit of buyers or funders.”*

Most small theatre artists lack true independence as holding other jobs is often a necessary reality for them. Sometimes, this necessity creates a sense of shame, a sense that the artist is perpetually struggling or living in poverty. This could be remedied with an attitudinal shift. Advocacy has a role here, not only in making economic conditions more comfortable for artists but in helping them to change potentially negative belief systems emanating from their need to hold other jobs. Another job, after all, can be an economic cushion for artists, and provide other skills and strengths.

The concept of “stealing” was discussed here – the idea that the Generator/RISER model might be repurposed by organizations wanting to claim it as their own. Yet it was noted that this model is shape-shifting. It cannot be rolled out in cookie cutter fashion because every company is different.

Top three takeaways

- ✓ The Generator/RISER model should be expanded and made sustainable
- ✓ A non-level playing field has to be addressed - some companies simply come into the process with more resources than others; and
- ✓ For hope to flourish communication must be continual. *“Hope is a beautiful thing to believe in, but hope cannot be realized until the issue of class in the artistic community is addressed.”*

PLANNING SUCCESSION

The plan is for the Generator/RISER model to be expanded across the country. However, before that is done, additional funding will be needed.

What makes a good “Generator/RISER” company? It was suggested that the companies on board should share core values. Once established, it is important that such values be embedded in the succession process. Yet, agreeing on core values may prove to be difficult as different artists working in different contexts have different ideas of what these might be. *“Art in the east coast is completely different than art in the west coast, and in the Indigenous territories. What works well here might not work well elsewhere.”*

Money was also seen by this group as a key issue. For some, fighting capitalism is seen as important; otherwise companies will find themselves serving the demands of the marketplace instead of art. The problem with this idea, however, is that it puts artists completely at the mercy of government grants. It was decided that money

should flow up, rather than down in an organization: that it should be used initially to support infrastructure, which would in turn generate profits for art. All agreed that everyone on staff in an independent company should be salaried.



Breakout group, led by Ravi Jain, Artistic and General Director, Why Not Theatre, discusses ways to expand the Generator/RISER model

It was determined that more careful incubation of several shows was preferable to using available funding for multiple shows. Growth can mean traction, and not necessarily ballooning or expansion. *"The ideal situation would be a normalized, Canada-wide system."* Another observation was that while money and material resources are great, mentorship is also critical. The RISER Project currently provides mentorship, but big companies should also do that. With a government incentive, perhaps that could be easier.

As this model expands, its ongoing impact needs to be measured and evaluated. However, patience will be key. One observer noted: *"you have to prove something three times for anyone to take it seriously, which is why a lot of young people fail."*

Top three takeaways

- ✓ Establishing core values is important. However, the model can and should be adaptable;
- ✓ The flow of money and resources needs to ensure that artists can focus on their art; and
- ✓ Growth is important, but growth doesn't always require ballooning or expansion.

FOSTERING HOPE

Participants were first asked about situations in their lives that made them feel hopeful, and those that made them feel hopeless. Many notes were tossed into the “hopeless” pile. Examples of things that made people feel hopeless included: stagnating wages; fake news; uneven wealth distribution. By far the most hopeless concept for participants was the affordability of lifestyle (especially living and working spaces) for artists in Toronto.

One observer wondered “*whether I should still be doing what I’m doing.*” Other participants noted that boards lack diversity; that class divisions create inequality; and that theatre is not as grassroots as it should be, with old models being imposed on new audiences. Another observer cautioned against the idea of being too hopeful.

However, some things made participants feel hopeful. Among these: the changing nature of storytelling; unionization; and “this event today.” As the conversation progressed, far more hopeful ideas emerged than hopeless ones.



Breakout Group led by Margo Charlton, Research Manager, Toronto Arts Foundation and Michael Wheeler, formerly of Generator, discusses the topic of hope in the performing arts sector today

The group spoke broadly about how hope should be defined. One participant said that it was useful to measure the level of hope within a given community, since its existence was proportional to the level of a community’s general health. She said that in order for hope to exist, “*you have to think that the future will be better than the present,*” and you have to be resilient. Another person brought up a dictionary definition of hope: “*to want something to be true.*”

Changes in government, too, have created hope. “*The government is less risk averse than it has ever been,*” said one participant. “*The money does seem to be flowing from the arts councils,*” said another person. There are also leadership changes that currently favour women and people of colour. Boards, some have proven, can be expanded so that non-diverse board members need not lose their places. It is estimated, however, that the process of making a board truly inclusive can take from four to six years.

