



Balancing Collaboration and Independence: Governance and Risk in the Toronto Fringe Festival's New Arts Partnership

Introduction

The Toronto Fringe Festival, a grassroots organization rooted in championing independent, boundary-pushing artistic voices, has consistently been a significant player in Canada's arts landscape. The organization operates as a platform for unjuried, uncensored performances, championing artistic freedom and innovation. In November 2024, the Fringe announced a new partnership with Souleppper Theatre, signaling a collaborative effort to pool resources, expand opportunities for artists, and amplify the impact on and of the arts sector.

This case study explores the motivations, potential risks, and governance requirements behind this collaboration, highlighting how the Fringe can retain its core identity and mission while participating in a partnership that seeks to create shared value for all groups.

Background: Toronto Fringe Festival

The Toronto Fringe Festival was founded in 1989, inspired by the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and subsequently the Edmonton Fringe Festival in Canada, with a mission to provide a platform for unjuried and uncensored artistic expression. From its inception, the Fringe has been dedicated to breaking down barriers for artists, offering opportunities to showcase work that is bold, experimental, and reflective of diverse perspectives. In line with the tenets of the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals, the Toronto Fringe is programmed primarily by a lottery process, or first-come-first served model each year. As the Fringe continued to expand, their efforts reinforced its reputation as a community-engaged festival committed to accessibility, inclusion and engagement with broader audiences and communities.

In 2008, the Fringe launched the Next Stage Theatre Festival, a more intimate and bespoke festival for emerging and mid-career artists to present more polished productions, providing them with a curated platform to reach new audiences and further their artistic careers. Through its evolution, the Fringe has remained steadfast in its mission to champion artistic freedom and foster community engagement. It continues to

serve as a vital incubator for independent artists, playing an essential role in shaping Canada's cultural landscape.

Annually, the Fringe maintains a lean staff complement and ramps up support during the festival season. Each year requires the finding and securing of performance venues and festival hub sites across Toronto's west end, as well as adhering to an annual budget of approximately \$1.5 million. There is a desire to enhance engagement, establish deeper connections with other arts organizations, and develop the quality of the festival overall.

Currently, the Toronto Fringe Festival is led by a dynamic team of arts professionals dedicated to its founding principles of inclusion, accessibility, and artistic independence. The organization is characterized by its entrepreneurial spirit, agility, and commitment to community engagement. Under this leadership, the Fringe has maintained its focus on empowering artists while navigating the challenges of a rapidly evolving arts landscape. These traits have enabled the Fringe to remain a resilient and vital force in the Canadian arts sector.

The Partnership

In November 2024, the Fringe announced a groundbreaking partnership with Soulpepper Theatre. This collaboration aims to foster resource-sharing, create innovative programming, and strengthen the arts ecosystem in Toronto. This partnership marked an important evolution for the Fringe as it sought to balance its grassroots ethos with the opportunities provided by collaboration. This three-year agreement is part of a larger project that Soulpepper initiated called the Creative Collaboration Initiative which includes not just Soulpepper and Fringe but also the Musical Stage Company, Obsidian Theatre, and Bad Hats Theatre.

This partnership is transformational and marks a significant milestone for the arts community in Toronto. The Creative Collaboration Initiative is exploring meaningful resource-sharing, sharing capacity, offering artists expanded access to rehearsal and performance spaces, and creating innovative programming opportunities. Additionally, the partnership will facilitate mentorship initiatives and professional development, further supporting the artistic community.

The partnership emphasizes shared advocacy efforts, uniting the organizations to amplify their collective voice in securing funding and policy support for the arts sector. By leveraging the strengths of each partner while preserving their unique missions, the collaboration seeks to drive greater impact for artists and audiences alike, ensuring the arts remain accessible, vibrant, and resilient.

Key Elements of the Partnership

- **Shared Space and Resources:** The collaboration includes access to Soulpepper's infrastructure, including rehearsal and performance spaces, as well as administrative support.
- **Joint Advocacy:** Together, the organizations aim to amplify their collective voice to secure funding and policy support for the arts sector.

Partnership Objectives

- Enhance the Fringe's organizational capacity to support independent artists.
- Expand audience reach through Soulpepper's established networks.
- Embrace innovation by creating new programming and cross-organizational initiatives.
- Strengthen the arts sector's resilience through collective advocacy efforts.

Planning for the First Fringe at Soulpepper

The Fringe's partnership with Soulpepper represents a bold step towards innovating resource-sharing in the arts sector. However, the board and staff are aware that the success of this collaboration hinges on clear governance structures, careful risk management and robust evaluation. The staff and board of directors recognize that with any new opportunity, it is essential to recognize that risk is an inherent part of growth and innovation. While this opportunity may present exciting possibilities for success, it may also come with some uncertainties that need careful consideration. To name a few, risks might include:

- Mission drift;
- Resource imbalance between organizations;
- Governance and decision-making;
- Audience perception; and,
- Financial risk.

Critical thinking is essential when developing the evaluative and risk mitigation frameworks necessary to support this work.

As the Fringe prepares for its upcoming festival this summer, how should they engage deeply in navigating uncertainty while leveraging opportunities? What are the complexities of this strategic partnership? What would you envision are solutions that will drive collective impact while safeguarding organizational integrity?

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### **Discussion Questions for Learners**

- How does this partnership align with Fringe's mission, vision, and long-term goals? What potential trade-offs might be involved?
- How can the Fringe mitigate the risks associated with this partnership?
- What governance structures would you recommend to balance power dynamics and protect organization's interests?
- How can the Fringe maintain the trust and support of its core stakeholders, including artists and audiences, throughout this collaboration?
- What criteria should the Fringe use to evaluate the success of this partnership?

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