



Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT)

Submission to Canadian Heritage of PACT's Town Hall on Canadian Content in a Digital World

November 24, 2016

THEATRE Theatre has the power to heal, connect, teach and entertain. The origins of western theatre can be traced back to the sixth century BCE and the classical Greek theatres carved out of hillsides seating 10-20,000 spectators. Live theatre is a distinct and resilient art form that shape-shifts with evolution, revolution and invention as the centuries pass and new thoughts, politics and trends affect our day-to-day life. In today's world, the advent of digital technology is an inevitable storm of change that provides yet another opportunity to amplify and extend the universal appeal and relevance of story-telling through theatre. Generations of theatre-makers and theatre-watchers have successfully navigated world change so far, and live theatre will continue to be a unique contributor and celebrator of our society and our culture.

CANADIAN THEATRE There are 143 professional theatres who are members of the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (as well as many others across the country) representing great diversity in size and scope, artistic mandate, history, geography, international activity and demographics. Canada's professional theatre artists are story-tellers at heart, constantly collecting groups of actors and theatre professionals to present live audiences with compelling and poignant work. Theatre has the power to simultaneously enlighten, challenge and entertain. It is because the most basic, drilled-down simplistic version of live theatre is a performer and an audience, and because theatre is born in the immediacy of the moment, it has unique and irreplaceable value. Within our membership, there is also a vast diversity of technological/digital experience and capacity, with limitations generally linked to funding and opportunity. As theatre artists are consummate inventors of story and design, many PACT theatre companies are currently using digital technology, such as Boca del Lupo in Vancouver and Ghost River Theatre in Calgary. Digital technology can accelerate the reach and impact of theatre in a multitude of creative ways, and we at PACT are energized by the possibilities.



Fall Away Hom (Boca del Lupo, 2013)

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY offers opportunity to Canada’s theatre industry – its artists, producers and audiences both at home and abroad. Digital technology can be an enabler – from its integration as a core part of the audience experience, to contributing to the work on the stage through visual and sound design, to promoting our work and broadening the engagement of actual and potential audiences, providing a gateway to the world’s theatre arena. In short, the new digital reality allows theatres to leverage this unique live experience, to extend it beyond the immediacy of live, fixed performance and to engage many more people in the conversation that began with the theatre artist’s story.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS Heritage’s consultation paper asks three complex questions. In a PACT virtual town hall held November 14, 2016, member theatres came together to consider these questions. The following key points emerged, principally focussing around the question:

How do we support Canada’s artists, content creators and cultural entrepreneurs in order to create a cultural ecosystem in which they thrive and that will benefit the growth of our middle class at home, and help them reach beyond our borders?

CONTENT CREATORS

Theatre companies are fundamentally content creators. Theatre companies are not intermediaries or middle-people. Theatre companies are living, fluid content-generators, led by Artistic Directors with artistic vision.

Theatres produce the work of artists (playwrights, creators, makers) by employing other artists (performers, singers, dancers, designers, artisans, etc.) and engaging with the public. The piece of work, or the play, can almost always be successfully exploited and its impact extended further using digital technology. This is what we want to continue to do.

We urge the Government to recognize and value theatre companies as primary content creators in our cultural ecosystem, who are ready and willing to use digital technology to leverage the impact of their core live performances, thereby allowing the artists and their work to thrive.



Brad Griffiths and Geoffrey Ewert in *The Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* (Ghost River Theatre 2014), Photo by Benjamin Laird Photography

THE INVESTMENT Canadian Heritage Minister Melanie Joly has acknowledged that resources have been scarce for Canada’s artists and arts organizations over the past several years – the same time period wherein the reality and potential of digital technology has been exploding. For the most part, theatres have been cash-strapped in terms of the investment – human, time and dollar – that they could allocate to continuous and fruitful digital exploration.

The Government of Canada’s significant infusion of funds into the Canada Council is a much welcomed boost that will undoubtedly allow many theatres to explore the potential of digital technology in their art, something that has only been possible for a few theatre companies to date. The Canada Council’s \$88.5-million commitment to its digital program holds welcome prospects and opportunities. As the Canada Council supports the incorporation of digital technology into content creation, we hope to have the parallel support of Canadian Heritage to invest in the acquisition of the skills and tools needed to promote, disseminate and export that content.



The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (Stratford Festival, 2016)

ARTISTS The art of theatre creation and production is based on a collaborative model as it is the product of contributions of many artists from various disciplines as well as technicians, marketers, producers and administrators. It is a priority and a necessity for all of PACT’s member theatres and, indeed, Canada’s professional theatre sector in general, to provide individual theatre artists and content creators with an environment in which they can thrive.

NEW BUSINESS MODELS With regard to new programs being developed at the Department of Canadian Heritage, we urge the Department to recognize the need for support for artistic organizations to innovate and create new business models that will ultimately result in using digital technologies to their maximum potential. In particular, new business models are required if we are to succeed in exporting Canadian theatre beyond our borders. The present export and touring models are prohibitively expensive and require long-term planning. We urge the Government to ensure coordination and linkage between the digital strategy and the cultural export strategy.



Robert Lepage, Needles and Opium (exMachina) photo by Nicola-Frank Vachon

CONCLUSION Canada’s professional theatres are embracing new technology for the benefit of their art, their story-telling techniques and their audiences who are watching, and we are keen, as always, to do much more. As live theatre has successfully evolved for thousands of years, taking advantage of technological revolutions at every turn, we are poised to boldly imagine the possibilities of our future enhanced by the digital realm. Digital technology has the potential to ensure that the cultural messages of theatre creators such as Robert Lepage, the SpiderWeb Show and countless other talented Canadian theatre-makers, reach a greater and more engaged audience than ever before.

PACT and its members are always happy and ready to participate in the conversation.

Bonnie Green
Chair, Advocacy Committee
PACT

Appendix:

Letter to Minister Melanie Joly from PACT, July 2016, stating PACT’s position on what “digital” means to professional theatre, examples of current digital/theatre projects cited and linked



July 12, 2016

The Honourable Mélanie Joly, MP
Minister of Canadian Heritage
15 Eddy Street
Gatineau, Quebec, K1A 0A9

Dear Ms. Joly,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT), in my role as the Chair of the board's advocacy committee. It is the body through which we consider and engage with public policy discussions.

You have often spoken, with great emphasis, about how Canada's arts and culture sector must embrace the potential of the "digital" era and new technologies. I also know the Department of Canadian Heritage recently undertook a national survey on digital opportunities which I hope provided you with insightful feedback. We certainly encouraged all PACT members to participate.

When my PACT colleagues and I visited Ottawa this past March, we also learned that Canadian Heritage staff are keen to hear from the artists and art creators on what the explosive growth of "digital" means to our sector – live theatre. To that end, I am sharing some thoughts and illustrations of how digital technologies impact our sector, and hold great potential for the future.

At first, the phrase "digital theatre" seems like an oxymoron – the delivery of live performance being almost antithetical to a digital delivery, but with further reflection it is clear that digital technology can complement our artistic practices and enhance our business capabilities nationally and abroad. Theatre artists are natural innovators and have already dived deep into the digital world.

PACT's membership is comprised of highly motivated artists and arts leaders who, out of necessity and artistic impulse, are constantly inventing new ways of mastering a task, and always challenging the status quo. Digital technology is being embraced extensively by all of our members in numerous ways – as is evidenced by the extensive list of examples below. We are artistic creators and we are also the content-providers fueling innovation in the digital world.

The Department of Heritage's Cultural Advisory Committee for consultation on Canadian Content in a Digital World is currently without representation from the performing arts. PACT strongly feels that our members have a unique knowledge-base and expertise in this area, and much to contribute. We respectfully request that a voice from the live performing arts sector be added to the Committee. PACT would also be pleased to bring together a group to contribute to the dialogue of the Advisory Committee.

Here are three solid threads of intersection with examples of the plethora of ways that theatres are already using the digital format:

CREATION of WORK, NEW ART FORMS – Digital enhancement within a Performative Lens

- STAGE
 - Vancouver’s Boca Del Lupo’s *The Perfect Artist* uses digital technology to place the audience in the position of the artist and aggregate the performances onto a larger display for others to view
<http://bocadellupo.com/the-perfect-artist/>
 - **SpiderWebShow**: this interactive online theatre experience is described as “a theatrical space where Canada, the Internet and performance minds intersect”. Theatre artists contribute in a myriad of ways; they deliver their daily thoughts via “thought residencies”, they post opening night Instagrams, they make videos about their process, etc. – all to promote and motivate theatre industry growth in the tech sector
<https://spiderwebshow.ca/>
 - Theatre New Brunswick’s *Returning Fire*, in which two characters text each other as they travel to their meeting place; the audience receives the texts and discovers where to witness the reunion
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXTYUT3p3pc>
 - Boca Del Lupo’s *Landline*: a person-to-person performance experience using a cell phone and mapping tech
<http://bocadellupo.com/landline-vancouver-to-kitchener/>
 - *Rihannaboy95* by Jordan Tannahill, a play inspired by a queer Muslim teen whose lip-synching video goes viral is live-streamed on YouTube: anywhere in the world, if you logged in at 8:00 pm EST, you could watch a live video performance
 - Banff Playwrights Colony and Boca Del Lupo’s *Red Phone*. A short-format conversation using teleprompters in custom phone booths supported by software that enables audience to act as performers as they engage in conversations written by prominent Canadian playwrights, <http://bocadellupo.com/red-phone-2/>
 - *Good Timber* presented by The Other Guys Theatre on Vancouver Island used digital images to enhance their historical production
 - Radix Theatre has a theatre piece that uses GPS tracking to bring the performance to individual audience members over a 30-day durational work
 - NightSwimming builds websites around many of its new creations; exploring the point at which the audience are brought into the creative process
- SIMULCAST
 - The Met Opera and the UK’s National Theatre, two high-profile performing arts companies accessing instant global reach
- SCREEN – VIDEOS of THEATRE WORKS
 - Stratford Festival is creating DVDs of their productions of Shakespeare’s canon
 - Soulpepper, in partnership with Thunderbird Films, is adapting *Kim’s Convenience* for CBC TV; *Alligator Pie* is being explored as a web series for kids, and *Billy Bishop Goes to War* was adapted to film with Union Pictures

DISSEMINATION – SHARING the WORK ONLINE

- Exporting our product to the global market using digital promotional tools
- Videos that bring the story to life, engage audiences via websites, promote discussion and provide access to content
 - Theatre Calgary behind the scene videos: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLiaT5oaBTPNUKH0YQOsECXytGj6PgQdWT>
 - Stratford’s “making of the dress” in *Taming of the Shrew*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=esaPGTQo_ac
- Live Stream chats
 - Geordie Productions in Montreal hosted a 10-company Season Launch using the live-streaming app Periscope
- Blogs that illuminate the process and share the work, offering insights into Canadian theatre for audiences and potential partners
- Interactive Study Guides
 - Young People’s Theatre video promoting learning opportunities:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3seX_WRfPt8

- Podcasts
 - Highlights from Soulepper's weekly Cabaret Series are published for free download and subscription
- Archives – that creates a permanent digital archive of the rich and varied history of our elusive art form

ACCESS – TARGETING and ENGAGING a BROADER AUDIENCE

- Digital presence is the key to attracting a younger demographic
- Online sales – maximizing ticketing systems
- Theatre season announcements
 - GCTC season announcement video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFZPJCNjPew>
- Three TYA (Theatre for Young Audiences) companies, Roseneath Theatre, Green Thumb Theatre and Geordie Productions addressed a digital marketing problem of video capture not reflecting top-quality live performance; a Canadian Heritage grant covered equipment, filming and website updating as well as the creation of digital education guides to be used by teachers
- Embedded videos, specifically shot/edited for today's market, capturing the essence of the play
 - Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland theatre company invited artists to read the Charter of Rights in video segments, in advance of playwright Michael Healey's political play, **Proud**
- Content Providers:
 - Facebook – posts, Emails to target audiences, Facebook Live Stream chats
 - Western Canada Theatre's "Daryl Talks" videos as pre-show teasers: <https://vimeo.com/wctlive>
 - YouTube, SnapChat (24-hr life span), Instagram, Twitter
- Community Development – presenting a united front
 - #theatre thanks, making friends in the right places
- Measurement of data for research and accountability

FUNDING the DIGITAL FRONTIER

Historically, theatremakers have embraced technology. Connecting live theatre performance to the complex digital world is always a worthy extension of our performative creative work, however, entrance into the digital world can be costly, requiring constant upgrading of skills, hardware and software

In order for live theatres to fully embrace the digital spectrum, to ensure that local and global audiences have full access to our digital platforms and to become more visible to the online world, resources, programs and funding are needed for:

- **Consultation and collaboration with digital technology providers:** Every theatre company has a unique relationship to the digital format and, as such, each company needs an individualized sustainable digital strategic plan with goals and strategies that complement their artistic product.
- **Digital Infrastructure:** In order to foster the creative learning impulse new creative technological infrastructure needs to be identified and purchased. This includes updating administrative systems cameras, software licenses for creation and production tools, websites, computers and other hardware, assistive devices allowing inclusion for those with disabilities and creation streams in the Disability Arts (e.g. surtitling systems).
- **Global Market and Remote Areas:** Digitizing our product can instantly allow access to remote areas (Canada's north and rural areas) and the global market thereby building community; this requires not only creative thinkers and artistic vision but also, workers skilled in digitizing and marketing a live theatre product.
- **Human resources:** Investment in artists to imagine, create and disseminate digital content, and to teach the content-creators of the future is required; this is in addition to investment in craftspeople and administrative staff to allow for the production and innovation on the stage and beyond.
- **Internships:** To "reverse mentor" our marketing and communications workers we need to engage Gen Z and leverage their digital know-how.
- Live theatre, like many disciplines, requires support for **conversations/collaborations** with unions and associations so that non-traditional ideas are not hindered by antiquated rules governing capturing, licensing and dissemination that result in prohibitive costs for all but the largest few organizations.

Thank you, again, Minister Joly for being a passionate and relentless arts and culture advocate. On behalf of PACT, we are pleased to be asked for information, and input into decisions and policies affecting our work and our future and connecting arts with our Canadian and global communities.

If you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me (bgreen@stratfordfestival.ca) or PACT's Executive Director, Sara Meurling (sara@pact.ca).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bonnie Green', written in a cursive style.

Bonnie Green
Advocacy Committee Chair, PACT
Associate Producer, Stratford Festival

cc Simon Brault, Director and CEO, Canada Council for the Arts
Marc Lemay, Director General, Canadian Heritage