

## Theatre Strategy Workshop May 3, 2019, 10 am – 12pm | Century House

The workshop was designed to address two areas for each venue; physical improvements or needs and the mandate of the theatre. After every 15 minutes of brainstorming, participants moved to a different table and discussed that venue. This process resulted in a good cross section of opinions and ideas.

30 individuals participated in the workshop and were representative of many different aspects of the performing arts as well as film. Municipal staff facilitated the discussion at three tables representing the three theatres.

### Massey Theatre

#### Physical Attributes

- Theatre is not currently accessible everywhere.
- Limited space to build sets and props – maintain the shop, others will use this if available
- Accessories to the theatre – storage, rehearsal space, percussion instruments in music rehearsal rooms, provide space for them, storage that is easy to access and return instruments, chairs and music stands for large musical groups.
- Develop space for rehearsals that are affordable, direct access and washrooms to each space. Storage if possible.
- Develop strategy to maintain and utilize full size of the theatre – do not lose capacity. Maintain the seating capacity for use by the Lower Mainland.
- Preserve the acoustics of the theatre, don't allow loss through absorption by removing hard surfaces.
- Reopen orchestra pit – explore the good or negative of this action.
- Accommodate community cultural needs for food as part of performance and celebration.
- Showers, green room, improve travel paths to and from the stage, need washrooms on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, a larger lobby that encourages ease of mingling.
- Look at attached space for incubation activity of productions affordable (i.e. Large and small gym should be used to support the arts.) Potentially develop a black box theatre space with seating of 100 max.
- Need places to rehearse and develop.
- Realize the niche potential of small spaces which will meet the needs of local theatre groups.
- Continue to improve and maintain technical capacity; infrastructure must be competitive.

## Mandate

- The city should be running the facility
- MTS should continue to operate the Massey Theatre because it has the history and support of the community.
- Avoid curatorial intrusion by the City to protect the artistic integrity
- Partnering with companies to support the work
- Consider what success is in terms of financial, attendance and community involvement
- Rental rates should include pricing for local groups
- Works with local groups to run programs
- Major focus to the operation scope – rental and presentation, dual focus that nurtures production by local companies, Massey should allow incubation.
- Can commercial or larger groups subsidize smaller groups?
- Enter into programming arrangements by contract to maximize inherent resources of local groups or companies – develop in-kind exchange.
- Policies of rental priority should be transparent to ensure fair distribution and allocation of resources – community value will define use.
- Expand exhibition areas for visual arts – exhibits enhance performances and performing arts support exhibits.

## Anvil Centre Theatre

### Physical Attributes

- The stage for theatrical productions is unsuitable – since cannot drill into it to secure sets
- Dancers can't tap on the floor
- The backstage area is shared by other amenities, so not useable for assembly
- Front Entry Desk should be more welcoming – used for the box office as well as info delivery. Front desk people provide security but not information about activities in the theatre and other spaces
- No coat check for the theatre
- Needs outdoor signage – boards to advertising what is on – design and to scale of the building. Lots of rules and bylaws because of the heritage nature of Columbia Street
- Software/Internet connection for tickets, accessing information – too many clicks to get to the key information.
- Negotiating the building; Interpretative spaces to facilitate ESL, perhaps a facilitator programmer
- Could there be an easier ticketing system? e.g. Eventbrite
- Meeting spaces for the arts individuals, also accessing the use schedules
- Rehearsal use when not busy – are there empty slots that could be filled: address issues of cost, hours of supervision, paperwork to make it happen. Who is the point of contact?

- Spaces shouldn't be designated for specific purposes
- Could Anvil be used as a mailing destination for the arts?
- Can the venue solicit sponsorships, is there a will? To help keep ticket and rental prices low
- Develop a process to solicit a sponsor and name the theatre
- Create a clear brand and identify spaces in the lobby, lower lobby and rehearsal rooms
- "Theatre is a gem – loads to love about it."

### Mandate

- Expectations of the community for the Anvil Theatre
- Is it now primarily "audience ready" events? Can it be more than that?
- Incubation space – flexible space for residencies, rehearsals and break-outs.
- How to get audiences involved - interactions and thinking space.
- Challenges: technically very sophisticated, so forces producers to do development in a particular way, limits what you can do, and you can't do anything you want.
- Accessibility: makes a great space for incubation work, because it is close to the SkyTrain Station
- What is arts programming – does yoga qualify?
- Gaining access to use the venues a challenge
- There are union codes – technician use and costs are higher than people can afford
- Could establish "Teasers" free studio for first readings
- Cross pollination with other groups (mutually beneficial)
- Hours of use – must be accessible and affordable:
- "at the end of the day, it can be the perfect venue, but if it isn't affordable, it will not benefit the community."
- Clear definition of the operating policy – priority setting framework
- Why does it charge for empty space?
- More education programming – issues discussion, lectures, debates and programs. Filled by Museum and Art Gallery
- Be clear about what it is NOT. Is it innovative, contemporary and boundary pushing?
- This space does not have to serve all community needs. What does it do best and do that!
- If it is a presenter that invites work that meets high quality criteria, does that eliminate community artists from contention for the space.

### Bernie Legge Theatre

#### Physical Attributes

- More parking close to the building now that the arena is gone

- Sidewalk improvement and lighting
- Lawns and landscape improvement around the building
- Asbestos abatement – attention to this problem, planning to remove and leverage other funding
- More signage – in Park and outside. Bernie Legge is a Heritage building
- Better transit service, bike parking too.
- Improved communication with the City – site planning and special events
- Long term planning with the City needed – for fire safety, exits etc. and heritage improvements
- Replace stage and have it constructed by a professional company to make it safe and useable
- Lobby expansion – increase square footage; just barely can hold a full house.
- Old equipment – light, sound video – increase efficiency
- Share equipment with other theatres – collective assets that could be shared, props, pieces, off-site storage. Could this be a policy?

### Mandate

- Currently serves Vagabond Players – a strong producing company that is in residence with a lease agreement. Mandate is to create productions – 5 a season, September to June. Run a summer Youth camp to encourage youth involvement in theatre. Lend costumes to other groups. Has a strong relationship with their loyal audiences. Have co-produced with Page Theatre, rented to Hyack Ambassadors.
- Vagabond match the scale of the venue to the type of performance created.
- Vagabond is working the venue at capacity – auditions, set construction, rehearsals and performance.
- Vagabond has spawned small groups to break out on their own.
- Group consensus that recognizing and supporting the Vagabond players as the trustees of the venue is important.
- Opening up the use to others would involve partnership and collaboration. If expectations are unrealistic/high, Vagabond Players volunteer will not be able to meet them consistently.
- If the City takes over the Bernie Legge, the cost of upgrades, new storage areas, paid technical coverage, janitorial services may make the Bernie Legge use no longer affordable.
- Ideas for alternate use of the venue for single night use – such as soloists, small bands, poetry readings, new play readings.

### General Discussion

- Affordability and Rehearsal space is the greatest need:
  - For small groups, \$5 per hour with a 4-hour minimum is considered affordable.

- Larger groups feel they can afford a cost of up to \$25 per hour with a 4-hour minimum.
- For theatre or music users: affordability means that a group can use a space without a supervisory individual, has a key to open and lock up. There is access to a washroom, lighting and warmth.
- Musical groups or orchestras: affordability means the space has chairs and music stands, along with a piano and percussion instruments for use.
- Performance costs that affect affordability may increase ticket price beyond the residents' ability to pay.
  - Royalty, Equity and SOCAN fees and rules: If a small audience is expected to attend because the company has a niche market, then space must be small enough to limit the royalty costs for the play or the copyright costs of the musical score. These costs are calculated on a per-seat fee multiplied by the number of seats and the length of the theatrical run or number of concerts. If professional actors or musician are involved, the unions set a minimum fee scale according to the size of theatre and number of performances.
  - For productions of plays with high royalty costs, the larger the potential audience, the easier it is for a company to cover its royalty and pre-production costs. It can then set its ticket price to a break-even point of the house. The fee paid to actors and performers falls under the Equity rules and again may dictate the size of the house that is most appropriate for the potential audience.
  - Dance schools and performance schools have a special arrangement with SOCAN, the agency that charges for the use of music for lessons, rehearsals and performances.
- Box office charges affect affordability.
- The professional operation of a box office is important to a theatre. It seats people in the best seats of the house through a first come first serve selection process. This is particularly important for the players on stage if the attendance is not large; it keeps people together in a group and not spread throughout the theatre house. For popular shows, it tracks all ticket sales, who has arrived and where the latecomers are sitting.
- Technology is an important aspect of ticket purchases; people like the convenience of buying them online and paying for them with their credit cards. They can select their seats and print their tickets.
- The system in use requires a commission for using a credit card, the PST and GST to the governments and the operating cost of staff on the night of the show. Finally, there is a theatre surcharge per ticket that is a contribution to the theatre itself. A ticket price that covers all these costs can become unaffordable. How the local theatre manages this process for its renters and users is always under discussion.

## Stakeholder Consultations – June 2018 – March 2019

Consultations for the Theatre Strategy began during the facilitation of the Arts Strategy in June 2018. Interviews and focus group discussions have been conducted with the following stakeholders, a sampling of groups most active in the performing arts.

### Key Stakeholders

- Massey Theatre Society Board of Directors and Executive Director
- President of Vagabond Players and Membership of the Vagabond Players
- New Westminster Symphony Orchestra Executive and Conductor
- Maple Leaf Singers
- Royal City Musical Theatre Society
- Patrick Street Productions
- Head of Visual and Performing Arts, NWSS
- New Westminster Arts Council, Executive Director

### What was learned

- The key stakeholders in New Westminster are knowledgeable and skilled artists and administrators. They are passionate about theatres. They are adaptable and creative problem solvers.
- The importance of the city creating a theatre portfolio cannot be understated because these decisions will affect the theatres and the performing groups that use them in the long term.
- There is a community of performing artists, professional actors, directors, designers and producers that live in New Westminster and work in Metro Vancouver. If there was a way to create opportunities for these people to work in New Westminster, it could have a considerable impact on the community.

### Regional, Provincial and National Consultations

- Information was gathered from the following:
- Director of Civic Theatres, Vancouver
- Executive Director, Vernon and District Performing Arts Centre
- General Manager, Port Theatre, Nanaimo
- Executive Director, Gateway Theatre, Richmond
- General Manager, Firehall Arts Centre, Vancouver
- Executive Director, Royal & McPherson Theatre Society, Victoria
- Senior Theatre Consultant, Design, Technical and Management, RWI

### Regional

#### Vancouver Civic Theatres – Queen Elizabeth, Orpheum and Vancouver Playhouse

- Director Sandra Gujic had just resigned when she was interviewed. The Civic Theatres are rental only theatres. Her mandate had been to take the theatres into

a programming model without disrupting the resident companies such as the Symphony, Opera and Ballet. The Civic Theatres are underutilized and appear to be dark much of the time. A major theatre study was commissioned by Vancouver in 2017. Sandra shared her analysis of the situation in Vancouver.

- There has been a programming change in the last decade. The big blockbuster musical theatre productions that were resident for months in Vancouver's Theatres are no longer in production. Touring shows come for a much shorter time. The sets and lighting are simplified to save money. The additional challenges of downtown construction, parking costs and overlap with events in the arena have discouraged audiences from coming downtown.
- Sandra believed that the Civic Theatres would not succeed in the long term in the new world of video streaming, home entertainment and high productions costs without embracing the creation of a programming component to its operation.

### The Firehall Theatre Society

- One of the leading producers, presenters and initiators of original works is the Firehall Theatre. Over its history under the leadership of artistic director Donna Spencer, the artistic reputation reflects innovation in dance, music and theatre. The Firehall Theatre serves as an example of the potential that exists with strong artistic leadership. The Society has a lease agreement with the City of Vancouver for the Firehall. It is currently being renegotiated.

### Provincial

- The next three theatres are the best examples of successful operations. The Vernon and District Performing Arts Centre, the Port Theatre, Nanaimo, and the Richmond Gateway Theatre have each developed an artistic brand, curating concerts and productions for the tastes of their community. As a result, they have a strong following and very stable ticket revenues. Whenever possible, the presenting theatres cooperate and block book artists in a circuit to provide the performers with a confirmed tour. The skill and knowledge of the artistic managers is reflected in the enthusiasm in the community for their programming. The venues expect their presenting program to be self-sustaining with sponsorship and ticket sales across the season.
- The three theatres reviewed have a special relationship with their City. Both the [Port Theatre, Nanaimo and the Vernon DPAC](#) have established co-management agreements with their Cities. The relationship in these agreements shifts to an equal balance of responsibility for the physical plant and ownership of all interior fixtures. Also, the Board and Executive staff report directly to Council on an annual basis.
- [The Richmond Gateway](#) is now exploring the opportunities found in engaging their Asian population. Theatre productions that reflect the realities of being Asian in Metro Vancouver will allow the residents to feel more comfortable in the building.

- [The Royal and McPherson Theatre Society](#) in Victoria is the only operating society that is operating strictly rental halls. This society faces many challenges because although the Royal Theatre is the home to the symphony, opera and ballet, rental rates have not increased for many years. These institutions are feeling the financial squeeze and resist any increases in their rent.
  - Owned by member municipalities of the Capital Regional District, the financial support is only \$100,000 annually, and the theatre is rapidly depleting reserves that had accumulated when all the large touring shows came to Victoria. The MacPherson Theatre is owned by the City of Victoria and provides the operation with a reasonable supporting subsidy.
- [The Arts Centre Theatre](#) in Maple Ridge and the [HUB International Theatre](#) in Chilliwack are examples of society operated theatres thriving in an arts centre environment. Certain synergies are created for the community when an art gallery, arts studios and programming spaces inhabit the same building. All the information was gleaned from their website, as no response has yet been received from email correspondence.

#### What was learned from the case studies?

- The success of a theatre operation is based on the artistic product that is available to audiences.
- Establish a programming arm or artistic profile by curating what is presented establishes a brand for the theatre.
- Expecting that product to come on its own via rentals is almost impossible.
- Building a strong relationship of trust and respect between the Society and the City is a foundation for success.

#### National

Nationally information was gathered to understand the rationale and consequences of merging all the municipally owned theatres in Toronto.

- Executive Director, Toronto Civic Theatres
- Manager, Toronto Theatre Centre
- Former General Manager of St. Lawrence Centre
- First Ontario Centre for the Arts, St. Catharine's Ontario
- Dean of Arts, York University (and Theatre Consultant)
- Executive Director, Living Arts Centre, Mississauga, Ontario

#### Toronto Civic Theatres

- Sony Centre, 3191 seats
- St Lawrence Centre (Jane Mallet Theatre 497 seats, Bluma Appel Theatre 531 seats on two levels)
- Toronto Centre for the Performing Arts (George Weston Hall, 1036 seats, Lyric Theatre, 574 seats, Greenwin Theatre, 296 seats)

- In Toronto, the cost of operating the major civic theatres became a topic of concern when Toronto merged with its surrounding municipalities. The first step was to consolidate all the theatres under a Civic Theatres structure. The operating staff and systems were streamlined to reduce costs. Research showed that the venues were only at 30% capacity of use.
- The theatres are all primarily rental halls and now have one booking office. Other than the resident companies that book their events on an annual basis, everyone else is on a first come and first serve basis.
- The Sony Centre (once named the Hummingbird Centre) was created as a non-profit society and received charitable status many years ago. This society under the merger now serves all the theatres of the conglomerate and provides the tax receipts for donations. It also allows the programming staff to solicit rentals, sponsorships and marketing advertising.
- The funding structure is such that the City of Toronto provides an annual operating subsidy and at the year-end, the profit is returned to general revenue, and if the theatres are in deficit, the City covers it. The General Manager was looking to establish a reserve fund and work on a 5-year cycle of operating sustainability that would allow the team to make programming decisions rather than operating on an annual rollercoaster of ups and downs. The new system would provide the incentive to program successfully and leave a safety net for those times that do not achieve a break-even status.
- Corporate functions, meetings and on-stage banquets are a revenue stream in the civic theatres not only in Toronto but in other cities that were surveyed. Program staff actively seek these rentals but wait until the programming or presenting program dates have been set.

### Mississauga Living Arts Centre

- Mississauga Living Arts Centre is home to three theatres, Hammerson Hall 1315 seats, RBC Theatre 350 telescopic seating, Rogers Theatre 110 seats and a small artists co-op art gallery, arts studios and meeting rooms. The centre is operated by a non-profit society that presents touring artists in the theatres, rents them to local performing arts groups, and commercial renters. It programs the arts spaces and studio spaces as well as attracting conferences, large private meetings and catered functions and banquets in the large atrium lobby. There is a careful balance maintained because the arts component is the building's primary function, but the conference revenue is the least risk for guaranteed revenue.
- *"The Living Arts Centre is not a community centre, but it wants to be the centre of the community."* Natalie Leu, Executive Director
- The Society has an operating agreement with the City and falls under the Director of Facilities, Property Department that also looks after the Art Gallery, Library, City Hall etc. The city provides maintenance, security and janitorial. The

biggest challenge is that janitorial staff rotate through all the buildings and so there is no consistency in the standards required in the Arts Centre.

- The operating staff of the complex is 40 full time plus auxiliary as needed. Beside the theatre technical crews, the staff include a development officer, marketing and promotions staff, box office and front of house. There is a volunteer team that serve as ushers, ticket takers, coat check and man the information desk whenever the building is open to the public.

## Emerging Trends, Issues and Themes

### Stakeholder Consultation and Arts Strategy Alignment

The Arts Strategy 2019-2024 included an extensive community consultation process. The Arts Strategy serves as a framework for the Theatre Strategy. Building on the Arts Strategy's vision and aligning actions specific to the theatre venues and the disciplines of music, dance and theatre will provide the directions for performing arts development.

Many themes that emerged in the Arts Strategy were repeated during interviews and meetings with theatre professionals and performing arts societies for the Theatre Strategy. Understandably, in these discussions, individuals focused their concerns on the challenges and future development of their organization and their artistic craft.

Three overarching themes emerged from discussions with the key stakeholders about the theatre portfolio:

- Need for security and operating governance for the long term.
- Need for a single point of contact/communication that allows for responsive action.
- Artistic product is most important no matter what the governance model.

### Comments from Arts Strategy consultations about Performing Arts 2017-2018

- Activate City owned theatres to maximize community value - more community use of City-owned theatres needs to happen. This input was provided by theatre representatives. Affordability was cited as an issue by the community.

### Arts Strategy Survey

A Survey was conducted for the Arts Strategy. Responses that were theatre or performing arts specific are noted:

- Q7 – chart shows that the largest number of people who responded were audience members.
- Q8 – the top two disciplines noted were music, theatre
- Q10 – how often do you attend? 47% responded: several times a year,
- Barrier to attendance: time, accessibility. variety not great, marketing and communication awareness, too far away from home, programming age specific, not for adults.

- Impact of arts on community
  - community well-being 92%,
  - then economic impact 88.6 %,
  - followed by tourism, education, quality of life, neighbourhood identity

#### Comments from survey:

- Anvil is too expensive, more music, build capacity in local arts organizations,
- Anvil not used to its capacity, there is a need for professional theatre

#### Business sector focus group

- need for better marketing and promotion,
- need for public private partnerships to create support in the long term,
- creation of spaces for collaboration and experimentation,
- lack of funding, affordable space for creation,
- need events and program for younger demographic – 18-35

Business perspective is the arts: creation destination places, innovative hubs, general educational opportunities. Helps the community experience each other's cultures.

#### General Comments

- Build capacity in performing arts – grow groups who make music and theatre
- Is the vision beyond our capacity?
- This is the City I want to live in
- We need to be the destination
- New West has grit and I don't want to lose that.
- Create and maintain your audience – strengthen capacity of our talented artists
- Venues to test out your ideas – be creative for free and try things out?
- Lack of space to rehearse and work, bring students into the local arts industry.