

THE MUSICAL STAGE CO.

6 Months In...

A report for our community on our work (so far) during COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

On March 13, 2020, The Musical Stage Company closed its physical office and began working remotely due to the rampant emergence of COVID-19. By March 17, 2020, we had cancelled all of our in-person gatherings until further notice including the postponement of our production of *Kelly v. Kelly* by Britta Johnson and Sara Farb. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, setting off protests around the world for Black Lives Matter, and sparking an overdue reckoning about systemic racism and - as part of it - the white supremacist system that theatre operates within.

As we close in on six months since we left the status quo behind, this report is intended to document, record, and reflect on what we have done, what we are thinking about, and where we are headed. It is neither a succinct philosophical statement nor a comprehensive action plan for the future. It is simply a transparent accounting of where we are as an organization striving to make impact while navigating a global pandemic, and planning for a future within an evolving macro-environment.

PART ONE: SUPPORTING MUSICAL THEATRE DURING COVID-19

Background

Right from the start of the pandemic, we felt lucky to be a nimble organization without a venue to operate or a subscription to manage. This allowed us to quickly pivot and implement a fast decision making process that was responsive and adaptive.

We established principles with which to approach our work during the pandemic:

1. *We would remain responsible to our stakeholders.* If we truly believe that “it’s better with music”, this current moment is no exception. Artists need work and payment during this challenging period and our audiences need meaningful encounters with musical storytelling to help them unpack their current reality. This is a moment to test the resilience of our mandate.
2. *We would program for the “now”.* We have to reassess relevance through a new lens, and create programming opportunities that meet people where they currently are emotionally. What we originally programmed for the years ahead may no longer resonate. Until we settle into a new normal, we have a responsibility to speak to the current moment.
3. *We would uncover the hidden opportunities.* The restrictions of COVID-19 also offer hidden silver linings to test new approaches and expand our geographic reach in a borderless digital sphere. We have looked at every program to not only figure out how it can adapt to COVID-19 restrictions, but also how those restrictions can allow us to reach new people, improve quality, or test a new model.

With these principles in mind, we restructured our staff and board operations to allow for quicker decision making and developed a model of budgeting and planning which was modular and flexible. By the end of April, our proposed new way of working was approved by the Board of Directors alongside a road map for the next six months of activity.

What We Have Done

Since the pandemic hit, we have:

- Produced 80 Porchside Songs concerts across the city – 40 minute concerts performed on private property for groups of friends or neighbours. This initiative reached over 1500 patrons and allowed us to hire 7 artists and 1 stage manager/producer for the summer.
- Produced 16 multi-day workshops for new Canadian musicals via Zoom (10 for *Retold* by Fatuma Adar & Ben Elliott, Suzy Wilde & Rose Napoli, and Adam Sakiyama & Kat Sandler; 4 for *Blackout* by Anton Lipovetsky & Steven Gallagher; 1 for *In Real Life* by Kevin Wong & Nick Green, 1 for *Rebellion* by Corey Payette), hiring 57 artists from coast to coast.
- Announced support for 1 new Crescendo artist (Anton Lipovetsky), 2 Banks Prize artists (Dillan Chiblow and Germaine Konji) and 6 RBC Apprentices (Fiona Sauder, Vanessa Sears, Olivia Shortt, Joey Lau, Alicia Barban, and Landon Doak), all of whom will receive financial support, career planning guidance, artistic mentorship and showcase opportunities throughout our season. We also distributed three \$500 bursaries to BIPOC, female musical theatre bookwriters (Fatuma Adar, Germaine Konji, Kanika Ambrose).
- Developed, rehearsed and recorded our first digital UNCOVERED concert (which will be released in November), hiring 15 artists and one full-time videographer.

- Launched our first national One Song Glory which will allow 100 young people from across the country to collaborate and train with 48 professional artists, working together on the creation of original songs and accompanying music videos which capture the feelings of young people from coast to coast during this time. Participation is offered to all participants free of charge.
- Offered a two month residency to the Songbird Series (Jordan Laffrenier and Fiona Sauder) to support the development of their organization which allows people to gift custom music recordings to loved ones.
- Reviewed submissions from over 850 artists for General Auditions, the Banks Prize and the RBC Apprentice Program and had face to face (via Zoom) meetings with 102 artists we were interested in meeting from these submissions.
- Participated in hour-long meetings with 15 teams of writers pitching projects for The Dan Fund, ultimately selecting two projects and awarding them \$8000 each in commission funding.
- Produced two online events that were viewed by over 100 donors each, engaging 11 artists in their creation.
- Kept in close contact with our community of supporters to share our plans for our upcoming season and helped them identify opportunities where they could support artists, our organization and projects in development. As a result, we have already secured pledges of approximately 52% of our fundraising needs for this fiscal year from individuals, corporations and foundations. This includes generous gifts from the Metcalf Foundation and the Hal Jackman Foundation for enhanced support during COVID-19. We extend our deepest gratitude to the sponsors and donors who trust us to reallocate their funding in light of programming changes and who are generously and steadfastly standing with us through such uncertain and constantly changing times.
- Avoided any layoffs of permanent staff members (though we have not extended contracts that might have been otherwise and there were new positions planned that we were unable to realize). We have been able to add the position of Deputy Artistic Director (for which Ray Hogg was hired) and Artistic & Administrative Coordinator to maintain an active program while managing the operational and financial complexities of COVID-19.
- Redesigned our financial projections to enable recent surpluses to be used in 2020/2021 to maximize support for artists and minimize cut-backs, while simultaneously maintaining enough of our accumulated surplus to ensure financial viability post-COVID.

Next Steps

In the coming weeks we launch additional programs including:

- NoteWorthy – Open exclusively to BIPOC artists, led by BIPOC artists, and delivered in collaboration with Prime Mover Theatre Company, this year’s NoteWorthy program will give BIPOC writers interested in developing musicals the chance to take masterclasses with BIPOC experts in the field and to collaborate with each other on writing assignments. Participation is fully subsidized for all participants and we will be provided a stipend for participation.
- Make Me A Song - We will share information in the coming weeks about our plans for this free, year-long choir program offered to students at the Regent Park School of Music.

With the first six months of COVID-19 adjustments under our belt, we are turning our attention to our Spring and Summer 2021 program to determine a model to maximize audience interaction and artist employment regardless of the state of social distancing.

PART TWO: PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Background

The quiet isolation of the pandemic illuminated the unhealthy pace our industry has been working at for years. The 'triple constraint triangle' in project management theory notes that to achieve quality you have to balance time, cost and scope, usually only being able to maximize one area by sacrificing another. Theatre in Canada (and musical theatre more so perhaps) requires the herculean effort of optimally achieving all three. There is little time; our musicals premiere in front of an audience less than 4 weeks after rehearsals begin. There is little money; we spend an average of \$500,000 on a new musical project and we are lucky if the box office can earn \$200,000, making any additional overages dangerous for the long-term sustainability of the organization. Scope isn't flexible; each individual production requires a fixed number of people on and offstage to make it work (as predetermined and mandated by the piece itself and various unions and associations that govern our artists, artisans, crafts people, and tradespeople). As such, we have achieved quality against all odds, but the pressure to maintain these nearly impossible constraints fall on the individuals; they must do their best work, on time and on budget without any margin of error. COVID-19 was a wake-up call that this model is unsustainable and requires reexamination.

The murder of George Floyd exposed another pandemic – the systemic racism that is pervasive in our society. Shamefully, we did not immediately understand the enormity of the reckoning at hand. We pledged support and solidarity to our Black artists, but we did not immediately recognize our responsibility to take urgent action to dismantle the parts of our organization that contribute to an inequitable world. Thanks to the immense labour undertaken by Black artists, Indigenous artists and other artists of colour from within and outside of our organization, it became clear very quickly that our industry and our company operate within the norms created by a white supremacist system. Decisions about programming, casting and hiring are made through a white lens at a board and staff level. Feedback about quality, enjoyment and achievement are fed back to the company through a mostly white lens at an audience and critic level. We may hire a large number of BIPOC artists, serve BIPOC youth, partner with BIPOC organizations, and select productions with a strong social relevance, but ultimately white people have been the primary beneficiaries of leadership opportunities at our organization and the primary recipients of the work in the audience. The powerful outcry of Canadian artists, and initiatives like Stratford's #inthedressingroom (which gave voice to microaggressions that have been happening across Canada in the theatre) served as an overdue wake-up call to recognize how often racism consciously and unconsciously plays into decisions in Canadian theatre. One of many examples of ignorance that hit home was an artist who bravely spoke out about an incident at The Musical Stage Company as part of the #inthedressingroom thread. This Black artist was refused an audition for a particular role in one of our productions because of a colour-conscious casting approach that exclusively sought out Black actors for the leading roles and exclusively sought out a white actor for one particular secondary role in order to curate a racialized dynamic onto the central characters of the play. This artist was right in noting that in our intent of bringing a racial commentary to the forefront of this play and Black representation to the leading roles, we unnecessarily created exclusion in this secondary role. Through this dialogue and by witnessing many other examples of painful exclusions perpetuated by white leadership, we recognize how often our assumptions, prejudices and biases inadvertently cause harm.

Looking at our industry through the lens of artist treatment and work-life balance, it is clear that we need to come back better. COVID-19 is giving us the opportunity to reassess everything. And we are seizing this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to plan for a different future.

What We Have Done

Our work so far has consisted of two parts: (i) community convening and artist feedback solicitation, and (ii) coaching, training and meeting.

(i) Community Convening and Artist Feedback Solicitation

On June 17, Mitchell reached out to the 400 artists in our database who have previously worked with the organization, inviting them to one of three Community Convening sessions to discuss how artists want musical theatre to return in a more equitable, humane way. While these discussions around inclusion would include examining systemic racism in our industry, they were also intended to look broadly at all of the ways the structure of theatre-making is problematic and can be improved.

Three community convening sessions were offered in June and July for two-hours each, open to any artist who had previously worked with us. One of these convening sessions was held as an exclusive space for BIPOC artists, moderated by Deputy Artistic Director, Ray Hogg. Staff members were invited to audit the convening sessions (except the BIPOC-only convening which was restricted to BIPOC staff members) and board member Thom Allison attended all three sessions. Each Convening asked participants to speak about what is on their mind during this time and what hopes they have for the future of the industry. After everyone had a chance to participate, we facilitated discussions around the common themes that arose.

For those who could not attend, or did not feel comfortable voicing concerns publicly, we set-up an online form where people could share feedback with The Musical Stage Company and hopes for the future of the musical theatre industry with the option of making the feedback anonymous.

48 artists attended the Convening sessions, and 11 artists chose to send feedback via the online form.

The common themes in the Community Convening sessions and online submissions were:

1. Creating equitable and inclusive spaces for BIPOC artists
2. The human cost of making theatre for all involved

We have shared key conversation notes from the Community Convening sessions in Appendix A. While the feedback in these conversations were about the industry in general, each of these reflections can certainly be applied to our past working models at The Musical Stage Company and hearing directly from the artists in our community helped us to set priorities for the future.

(ii) Coaching, Training and Meetings

During this time, all members of our organization have been working with external BIPOC consultants and coaches to help us develop anti-racism competencies and to offer an outside perspective on our organizational gaps and biases:

1. Mitchell Marcus is undertaking a four-course Inclusive Management Certificate offered by Anima Leadership throughout the Fall.
2. Victoria Barber (Director of Marketing), Paul Beauchamp (General Manager & Producer), Ray Hogg (Deputy Artistic Director) and Kate Supleve (Executive Director, Advancement) joined Mitchell for the foundational course with Anima Leadership called “Deep Diversity: Leadership Skills for Inclusive Workplaces”.
3. We hired Seraph-Eden Boroditsky, a Winnipeg-based Métis artist and activist, to work with our entire organization (full-staff and full-board) over four-half days on building an inclusive and equitable culture.
4. We commissioned a “call-in” letter from Edmonton-based Latinx artist and activist Natércia Napoleão which consists of a series of questions which – through specific tasks and assignments - require us to measure our past commitment to BIPOC artists, administrators and volunteers over the last five years to identify gaps and possible bias. We have completed the assignments and are currently working as a senior staff team and with Natércia to reflect on our results and create an action plan for the future. We expect this work to be completed by the end of October.

Additionally, general future planning has been informed by additional coaches, training seminars and participatory meetings:

1. We had a staff training session on disability arts and working with access needs, facilitated by Winnipeg’s Debbie Patterson.
2. One of our staff members, Alethea Bakogorge, is taking a “Leadership in Accessibility and Inclusion” course through Ryerson University.
3. Mitchell attends biweekly meetings with Toronto Artistic Directors to discuss the future plans for our sector.
4. Our marketing team was accepted to participate in a 25-hour ‘Digitizing Theatre’ course, offered through the National Alliance for Musical Theatre.
5. Our team is represented on TAPA’s Marketing Committee and Marketing Working Group, focused on maintaining audience relationships during COVID-19.
6. Members of our team participate in weekly learning seminars (offered through organizations like the National Alliance for Musical Theatre, Professional Association of Canadian Theatres, Toronto Alliance for the Performing Arts, Business For The Arts, Association of Fundraising Professionals, and Canada Helps), attend key online panels offered by our colleagues, and consult generally with our colleagues from coast to coast on a daily basis.

Even though our internal examination and long-term actions are not complete, we are implementing learning and change in real time. As such, while we may only be 6-months into the journey of recalibrating how our sector works and how our organization works within it, we are already incorporating learnings into the programming, hiring, policies, board planning, and internal operation that have been implemented in the last three months including:

- Asking artists to create their own preferred performance schedules for Porchside Songs.
- Reaching 50% BIPOC representation in all new hiring for workshops, productions, staff hires and Board of Director appointments.
- Committing to filling the pipeline of new musicals with BIPOC artists through a BIPOC exclusive NoteWorthy program.
- Reconceived our Apprenticeship programs to allow for deeper learning and a stronger trajectory for the artists following the apprenticeship.
- Increasing the number of open calls for programs and positions.
- Ensuring that subjective decisions are never made by one-person only and that assessment criteria are developed to minimize subjectivity.
- Reviewing all audition videos without looking at resumes to minimize bias.
- Offering the option of feedback to artists who submit to us.
- Taking more chances on artists new to the organization wherever possible.

Next Steps

Our next step is to build a detailed action plan for an anti-racist and more inclusive organization. This plan will include an ongoing commitment to internal review with external support in perpetuity. The questions we are considering on an almost daily basis include:

- What schedule will we implement in the future that allows for better work-life balance for all artists and a spirit of learning and patience in the rehearsal room?
- What is our plan to ensure our hiring and storytelling is radically diverse in the areas of the organization where it currently is not?
- How do we foster talent in the organization and how do we use our influence to help talent be fostered in peer organizations across Canada, creating pipelines for diverse artists who may not have been able to access the same level of training or experience as those with more privilege?
- Are our locations, ticket prices and stories conducive to building diverse audiences and how do we rebuild in a way that transforms who feels the theatre is for them?
- How do we dismantle power structures in the theatre to make it more democratic and to ensure that bias in decision making areas that are entirely subjective (e.g. casting) is reduced?
- How will we choose partnerships in the future and how can we be an ally to other organizations?
- What are we willing to give up and relinquish to help make things better?
- What (if any) is the future role in our program of the musical theatre canon given its almost entirely male, white and American point-of-view?
- What is the role of a Board of Directors? Can the community an organization serves be ultimately responsible for its governance and direction?
- How will we measure success?

CONCLUSION

We are proud of how we have spent the last six months but we are by no means finished. At this half-year milestone, we wanted to document the work completed so far, so that our team, board and community could reflect on what has happened while keeping us accountable to the work we have started and the approach we have taken.

This is a moment of great complexity. As an organization, we must grapple with three different time periods simultaneously, all of which are equally vital: (a) executing immediate operational activities to sustain our company, (b) designing plans for a COVID-world in the near-term (e.g. the next 6 months), and (c) envisioning our organization's role and priorities in a post-COVID world. We have designed a workflow that keeps our team accountable to each of these three distinct responsibilities every week. Our commitment is to keep listening, learning and critically assessing ourselves, turning each discovery into an action item for betterment, and - alongside the community we serve - build a musical theatre that is powerful, vital and equitable for the world to come.

We are eager to ensure that the perspective and voice of members of our community continue to be integrated into this work. As such, we invite your feedback on our work so far and/or recommendations for the future via our feedback form on our website: <http://www.musicalstagecompany.com/feedback/>

We promise to keep our community up-to-date on our work and will deliver another report on our activities and actions no later than six months from now.

APPENDIX A: NOTES FROM COMMUNITY CONVENING SESSIONS

This is a consolidated summary of the conversations from the three Community Convening sessions offered to all past Musical Stage Company artists about their hopes for the future of musical theatre in Canada:

1. Creating equitable and inclusive spaces for BIPOC artists:
 - In each Convening, artists wanted to see a future for the theatre where everyone feels a true sense of belonging.
 - Representation was a critical theme.
 - There was a universal desire to see more diverse participation (specifically in terms of race, but also in terms of gender and physical ability) in musical theatre projects across the country – from the writers, to directors, to musical directors, to designers, to people backstage.
 - Tied into the conversation around representation was always a conversation around power, noting how rooms where directors share power are much more inclusive spaces than those rooms where they do not.
 - Part of the consequence of short rehearsal periods and tech periods is a culture of fear rather than a culture of learning. So often rehearsal rooms are not a positive place for taking chances, and artists noted that pre-existing relationships amongst those who have worked together before (e.g. between directors and a company, or between directors and a designer) become an asset in a space where there is no time to build rapport and only time to accomplish.
 - There was frequent discussion around building a culture of mentorship to increase BIPOC leadership in areas that lack representation, and to allow existing apprentices to be given space and time to do more than just observe a busy creative leader.
 - BIPOC artists repeatedly noted the need and their desire to participate in the recruitment of young would-be artists (school-aged children, high-schoolers, post-secondary, and emerging) who pull back from pursuing arts for a variety of reasons including lack of representation.
 - BIPOC artists noted the weight of being the default cultural consultant on projects that lack BIPOC leadership and discussed wanting to have a clearer sense of the curatorial intent of a project, especially when it's a BIPOC story, to make sure that there is thought and sensitivity that has gone into the project planning and not tokenism or appropriation.
 - There was also discussion around how to design audiences and philanthropists so that those purchasing organizational access through ticket sales or donations are less homogenous.
 - The discussion of “excellence” came up several times – is excellence measured only in the level of polish, or can excellence be measured in the opportunities created?
 - Many BIPOC artists expressed having to risk being labelled as difficult to work with by advocating for themselves (and other BIPOC people in the room) or staying silent and allowing covert and overt racist incidents to occur without comment or consequence.

2. The human cost of making theatre for all involved:
 - Another common theme was the lack of balance available to those making a career in the theatre.
 - We discussed the difficulties of managing a 6-day rehearsal week and a technical period that can often see several 12 hour days in a row.
 - We discussed how many additional hours of work take place outside of the formal contract for stage managers and performers who are expected to be processing and retaining a day's work before the start of the next.
 - We discussed how difficult it is for artists to miss weddings and funerals and to feel pressure to attend work while sick or else risking the cancellation of an entire performance.
 - These pressures can make people feel very powerless in an already vulnerable situation.
 - Whether actors are auditioning or rehearsing, they rarely receive agency over their schedule, what they bring into the room, or how to use the time.
 - How does the power structure get redistributed and how do artists have the time and space to balance work and life and avoid the anxiety and burn-out that can so easily happen within the current structure, especially as these factors will disproportionately impact marginalized artists?

3. Additional conversations:
 - How Coronavirus and future safety protocols will put additional pressures on some areas that are already difficult to navigate (e.g. what happens when an actor gets sick, Stage Management prep).
 - The limits of the musical theatre canon which has been written and developed almost entirely by white men, permeating characters, narratives, and the lens through which we judge/assess excellence.
 - The importance of theatre coming back in a more environmentally friendly way.
 - The low salaries in theatre coupled with the high prices of living in Toronto.