

How Does Canadian Theatre Fare in Covid Times?

The Corona virus has impeded cultural and theatrical life almost everywhere in the world. Since spring 2020, theatres in Canada have been confronted with an uncertain future. How can they go on? How many theatres will be lost in the long run? How are playwrights, artistic directors and actors trying to cope with the situation? Some Canadian authors have created audio dramas out of existing stage plays. Others have discovered television as their new 'toy.' Others again, have recorded previously written but so far unproduced plays by streaming them straight through to an audience's computers.

Tarragon Theatre in Toronto went completely audio and presented their season as "Tarragon Acoustic" with audio performances of past hits like Wajdi Mouawad's *Scorched*. Theatre Passe Muraille had an exceptional season planned and at first were able to video-tape their shows to present online, but as things in Ontario got a lot stricter, even that was not allowed. A special feature in the current theatrical development in Canada is Buddies in Bad Times Theatre's *The Rhubarb Festival*. They moved away from performance and created a book of the festival in 2021 which turned out to be a real work of art. Some of the pieces in this book are scripts, but it also includes photographs and original art. Readers are encouraged to take part in the festival from home.

In order to get some first-hand information about what Canadian theatre is losing (and may also be newly discovering due to the pandemic), I have contacted some experts in Canadian theatreland, Annie Gibson, the publisher at Playwrights Canada Press, as well as some of the Artistic Directors at Canadian theatres, and asked them some questions, which they have kindly answered, thereby priming the pump for me, as it were.¹

Nina Lee Aquino, Artistic Director at Factory Theatre in Toronto, writes about the extent her theatre has been doing streamed and/or digital performances:

When the pandemic hit Canada in March 2020, we were two shows away from concluding Factory's 50th Anniversary Season. Instead of waiting to see what would happen next, we pivoted immediately to live digital performances. We did a reading of a new play on Zoom, *among men* by David Yee, and then we followed up with our first attempt at a virtual produc-

1 All unreferenced quotes are taken from this e-mail correspondence. The author has ascertained the right to publish the answers given.

tion, *House: The Isolation Edition* by Daniel MacIvor. With *House*, Daniel revisited his script and adapted the play to the virtual medium, rewriting it so that the character directly addresses the camera from his laptop instead of breaking the fourth wall and talking directly to an audience.

I asked her: “Have you been doing audio productions of either new or existing plays?” She replied: “Yes, in March 2021 we launched our audio series, ‘You Can’t Get There From Here,’ which consisted of five brand new commissioned audio dramas – each episode contained a self-contained story from each of the five playwrights involved in the series.” And are there contemporary plays dealing with the pandemic and its impact on the people of our time?

Very, very few virtual productions and readings of new plays during the pandemic dealt with COVID-19 subject matter. The majority of what I saw tended to be comedic sketches or satires. The other shows that I saw dealt more with the psychological and mental effects of the pandemic and touched on isolation, loneliness, disconnection to the world, etc. Others were more hopeful and optimistic and would often remind people of the importance of gathering and community. There were also works that may not have mentioned COVID-19 at all or any of its themes but it would be obvious from production elements that it was set during the pandemic (i.e. characters wearing masks or you see masks hanging around the set, etc.).

Ted Witzel at the Stratford Festival has also contributed detailed comments on Canadian theatre under Covid conditions. He commented on the regional differences between different parts of the country: “Canada being very federated and having a lot of heterogeneity between the different provinces and their makeup, those provinces have all set their guidelines, according to the information they have and the way politics affect those things.” However, good things are now on the horizon. A show that originated in Newfoundland, Robert Chafe’s *Between Breaths* opened at the PEI Confederation Centre for the Arts in June 2021.

Andrea Vagianos at Tarragon Theatre also dealt with my questions about whether they had been doing audio and/or streaming performances:

We closed the theatre on March 16th, 2020. Our 2020-21 season was entirely digital, as it was for all our colleagues in Ontario, because we were not permitted to be open. We offered a season of 18 audio plays (“Tarragon Acoustic”), 14 of which we produced; two of the 18 were completely new plays and the others were classic Canadian works from the Tarragon canon; we also produced one digital production that was online, in real

time, *Orestes*. We only produced one livestreamed show and audio dramas. We do know that some subscribers followed the recording while reading the plays, as they were classic Canadian plays first produced at Tarragon Theatre.

Ontario theatres were closed until this past July 2021 for over a year, whereas theatres in British Columbia and Quebec were able to perform to small audiences. The regulations vary completely province to province. The federal government did not make rules to be applied nationally. Ontario just announced today that 'vaccine cards' will be required for indoor activity, including theatre-going. We are relieved to have government direction on how to proceed with indoor performances, as we plan to reopen in January.

But what about the financial situation of actors, directors and others working in the theatre? Annie Gibson, publisher at Playwrights Canada Press, has this to report:

A lot of theatres have been operating on the principle of trying to get money into the hands of artists. That has meant finding new online or digital performance opportunities where they can pay actors, directors, and others. The federal government has stepped up with emergency funding from the Canada Council for the Arts, so lots of folks got a top-up to their operation grants.

"While there were no rehearsals allowed and no filming of theatre work allowed, film production companies were allowed to continue. So there was a fair amount of political and public discussion around that," Ted Witzel points out and adds with an eye on Germany: "I would also say the Canadian public is less engaged than the German public in terms of how much they take arts and culture policy as part of their sort of central consciousness on a day-to-day basis." In the current situation, theatre people in the world, and especially in Canada, are moving from pillar to post, as it were, i.e. between reality and a hope for better times.

Robert Chafe, Artistic Director in Newfoundland, has this to add:

We started the early lockdown period (March to May for us here in Canada) feeling quite at a loss for what to do and offer. We had just cancelled a number of touring dates and were being confronted with cancellation of our latest premiere. We of course started to consider digital sharing of work, but alongside the need to engage audiences we were also feeling an immense pressure to be highly original in doing so. We were seeing a lot of really ingenious work being shared, embracing the digital realm in really exciting ways, and those ideas were just not there for us.

Only recently, in her editorial to the latest issue of *TRiC*, Kim Solgar writes:

I know that when this issue hits your inboxes in May, things will look different: the vaccine will be in swing, the warmer weather will allow small businesses as well as our beloved arts organizations to once again get creative with their use of space, and hope will buoy us all as we look toward the long days of summer. [...] And I'm proud to offer this new issue of *TRiC* as perfect 2021 reading, filled as it is with reflections on hope for our theatrical future from some of the most promising young scholars and artists in our field. (Solgar 2021, 1)

Looking back at pre-Corona times, Canadian stage plays had been of growing interest to German theatres – not only because they give insights into Canada as the epitome of a multicultural country but also because they are based on exciting and innovative dramaturgical concepts and appear to be less inhibited by traditional structural patterns. The interviews discussed in this contribution raise the faint hope that Canadian theatre will continue to fulfil this function – and with new faces – after the Corona pandemic subsides.

References

Solgar, Kim, 2021, "Editorial Introduction", *TRiC, Theatre Research in Canada*, 42.1, 1-3.