

Changing the Conversation

BY TREVOR RUEGER

I once had a conversation with an artist friend during an election in the early days of the Reform Party. He said he was voting Reform. After picking my jaw up off the floor I stated that the Reform Party had no arts policy and in fact were probably going to cut funding to the arts. "How in your right mind, can you as an artist, vote for a government that is going to cut the arts?" His response, "You can't kill art. It will never die." Ironically, the candidate he was voting for was named Art Hanger. I ruminated on that sentence for a few days and came to agree with him about the statement "you can't kill art," although not with his party politics.

We have tried to market ourselves as smarter than television, different from television, an alternative to television, to little or no success.

So given the above statement, how in this past year did we see the demise of the Vancouver Playhouse, a not-for-profit, government funded theatre and the demise of Dancap Productions, a for-profit, non-government funded theatre?

In the Vancouver Playhouse scenario people were quick to blame the board of directors. An online petition circulated amassed over 2,600 signatures. The petition demanded the board reopen the Vancouver Playhouse, as if it were that simple. The board and management exhausted every option, but through many years of being involved in a rental agreement that was financially crippling, they couldn't keep their doors open. Public funding had dried up, private funding had dried up and ticket revenue was drying up. To try to assess blame in

this situation is akin to attempting to answer the question "who sank the Titanic; the captain or the iceberg?"

The reality of the situation is theatre will never break even. NEVER!! Our runs aren't long enough, our audiences aren't big enough and we have to maintain a ticket price that is affordable to the small audience we already have. In a straw poll I did with eight professional theatre companies in Alberta, from the largest to the smallest, ticket sales accounted on average for 28% of their overall revenue. So where is the other 72% coming from? The public sector and the private sector. This is the reality; we might as well embrace it. But we need to rethink how we start the conversation.

The argument that seeking out corporate money means that corporations will have control over the art that we produce is preposterous. If the CEO of a Fortune 500 company really wanted to produce theatre, don't you think he or she would be doing that? We don't have the expertise to tell them how to operate their industry, so why are we concerned that they'll be the least bit interested in running ours? The failure of Dancap is the perfect example of this. A businessman who loved Broadway shows thought he could import and sell them like he used to sell Aspirin. He thought that he could use the same business model to sell musicals that he used to run a pharmaceutical company. And \$40 million and five years later, his theatre company folded. Corporations have one overarching goal when it comes to philanthropy: "How is it going to make us look?" That is the conversation we must have: how is this going to make us both look good?

In terms of public funding, those pots of money aren't likely to grow any time soon, but yet there are more and more of us bellying up to the trough. The argument exists that if we seek out private funding sources, there is no incentive for the government to

add to the pot. If we show them that we don't need it, then it will be taken away. If that's our fear, then let's change the conversation. What we have been saying up to this point is we need more government money. As the government (by government, I mean government, not granting bodies) is pushing us toward greater private funding, then we need to push the government to create greater incentives for corporations to do so. Since we can't create money, let's create more beneficial and more appealing opportunities for private funders.

Ticket sales are the third part of this funding equation and there does seem to be a 72% hole that we could potentially fill. And it is here that we really need to change the conversation because it is the easiest place to start. We have tried to market ourselves as smarter than television, different from television, an alternative to television, to little or no success. So change the conversation. Let's start advertising like television. Let's stop telling people what they are going to think or feel by seeing our shows and let's start telling them what they are going to see. TV Guide doesn't tell you that Dexter is "a journey into the dark recesses of a criminal mind that will challenge your perceptions of morality"—it says "serial killer kills serial killers." Since this is the marketing that is keeping people home, perhaps this is the marketing that will get them off their couch and into our seats. When we get them in the door, let them figure out that theatre is different from film and television on their own rather than trying to tell them how it's different. If we change the conversation with audiences and grow those numbers, it becomes a lot easier to change the conversation with other funders.

Overall, we need to be clear in our messaging no matter whom we're speaking with: public and private funding doesn't go to subsidizing artists or productions, it goes to subsidizing **audiences**. This is the greatest piece of ammunition we can take into a boardroom, government office or when speaking to those dissenting voices who "don't want their tax dollars paying artists." The message needs to be, "Your tax dollars aren't going to subsidize me, they are going to subsidize **you**." A 2005 Canada Council study stated the per capita cost of funding all sectors of the arts was \$4.15. This keeps admission rates, ticket prices and the cost of buying books and music affordable. We need to tell the doubters that "you aren't paying me, you are paying yourself."



Trevor Rueger.
Photo credit: supplied.

The Playhouse is a cautionary tale and if we are to learn anything from it, let it be this: there was an impassioned outcry from artists over the closure. \$20 tickets were offered to opening night of *God of Carnage*, the cancelled production resurrected to

The argument exists that if we seek out private funding sources, there is no incentive for the government to add to the pot. If we show them that we don't need it, then it will be taken away. If that's our fear, then let's change the conversation.

finish their 49th season. Opening night attendance: 343 tickets of 668 seats and 265 were comps. They reopened their doors and sold seventy-eight tickets—\$1560 worth. Not enough to pay two of the four actors for a week. The lesson: speaking up isn't the same as showing up. They didn't need signatures, they needed money. We need to champion the work we do. Those concerned with the government pulling our funding by forcing us into bed with corporations, may I remind you that "art will never die." If the government stops funding us they will have provided us with an object and subject for our work. We're intelligent, literate and already know how to produce with minimal resources. You pull our funding and we will really change the conversation. **AS**

Trevor Rueger is a Calgary based actor, director, writer and dramaturg. Currently he is the Executive Director of Alberta Playwrights' Network.



Join the conversation at theatrealberta.com/all-stages-online.