

Edmonton Performing Arts Accessibility Report

Prepared by Kelsie Acton, Brooke Leifso, Heath Birkholz, Simone Medina Polo and Connor Yuzwenko-Martin



Table of Contents

Land Acknowledgment	4
Plain Language Summary	5
Local Context.....	8
A Note on Language	11
Method.....	12
Limitations	13
Audiences and Performing Arts Organizations	15
Gender	15
Age	16
Race and Ethnicity.....	17
Disability	18
Deaf, deaf and hard of hearing	19
Artists.....	20
Types of Events and Performances	21
Finding Out About Events and Performances	22
Overall Survey Demographics	23
Performing Arts Organizations.....	24
Barriers and Accessibility.....	26
Financial Accessibility.....	26
Transportation and Physical Accessibility	30
ASL Interpretation.....	32
Captioning	36
Hearing Loop Systems	38
Audio Description	39
Elements of Relaxed Performances	41
Pre-show Information	46
Equity of Experience.....	52

Priority Recommendations55
Resources58
Acknowledgements63
Researcher Biographies64

The Edmonton Performing Arts Accessibility Report was generously funded by the Edmonton Community Foundation, the Edmonton Arts Council and the City of Edmonton.

Cover Page Photo Credits:

From top to bottom:

1. Courtesy of Citadel Theatre
2. Courtesy of L'UniThéâtre
3. EPIC Photography. Concrete Theatre's production of Dave Clarke's *Songs My Mother Never Sung Me*.
Pictured left to right: Erik Mortimer, Luc Tellier, Susan Gilmour, Kieran Martin Murphy and Elizabeth Morris
4. Courtesy of Rising Sun Theatre

Plain Language Summary

This section is a short summary of what happened, what we learned, and what we think should be done with that information

Edmonton performing arts organizations believe that the arts are for everyone.

They wanted to know if it is hard for people to go to performing arts events, and how to make it easier. A group of researchers worked with performing arts organizations to find this out.

The researchers made two surveys. One survey asked people about:

- Who they are
- Their relationship to the performing arts
- Barriers to going to performing arts events
- How the performing arts could be more accessible

The second survey asked performing arts organizations about:

- What they do
- Why what they do is important
- What they are currently doing to make it easier for people to come to their events or performances

The researchers also talked to a lot of people in groups and one-on-one about their experiences with the performing arts, and what could change for the better.

Some of the things the researchers found are:

- Performing arts companies think really hard about how to make their work financially affordable
- For Deaf and disabled audiences it is hard to access the ways performing arts companies try to make their work affordable
- Deaf and disabled audiences have to do a lot of work to attend events. Sometimes this is educating about their needs, sometimes this is additional work to book tickets, or spending time finding out important information
- Cost was a major barrier to performing arts organizations providing more ASL interpreted performances and more captioned performances
- None of the performing arts organizations involved in the research do audio described performances or touch tours
- Audiences (regardless of whether they were Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing, disabled, hearing ,or non-disabled) all wanted to be able to get information about what was going to happen in the performance or event before buying their ticket or going to the venue

Based on all this information the researchers are recommending:

1. Performing arts organizations should give people more information about the venue, the social rules, and the performance or event ahead of time. Ideally, they should provide this information when someone is buying a ticket.

2. Edmonton performing arts should improve customer service. They can do this by improving their Deaf and disability knowledge. They can also do this by letting people buy access tickets online. Then performing arts companies can ask about people's access needs once the tickets are purchased. Performing arts can also hire people with disabilities or Deaf people as consultants.
3. Edmonton arts should have an online space advertising accessible performances, like relaxed, ASL interpreted, captioned and audio described performances.
4. Performing arts organizations should do more captioned performances, particularly open-captioned performances.
5. Audiences and performing arts organizations should advocate for more funding for access. Ideally organizations would share these tools and resources.

The consortium of performing arts organizations that initiated this research include, but are not limited to:

Alberta Ballet

Alberta Dance Alliance

Alberta Musical Theatre Company

Alberta Workers' Health Centre Work Play Schools Program

Azimuth Theatre

Ballet Edmonton

Catalyst Theatre

Citadel Theatre

Common Ground Arts Society

Concrete Theatre

Dreamspeakers Festival Society

Edmonton Opera

Firefly Theatre and Circus Society

Fringe Theatre

Fruit Loop

GeriActors Theatre

Good Women Dance Society

Grindhouse Theatre

Kompany Theatre Artists Society

Mile Zero Dance

NextFest

Pro Coro Canada

Punctuate! Theatre

Rapid Fire Theatre

Rising Sun Theatre

SkirtsAfire Festival

SOUND OFF! Deaf Theatre Festival

Theatre Alberta

Theatre Network

Theatre Prospero

Theatre Yes

Ukrainian Shumka Dancers

Varscona Theatre

Walterdale Theatre

Winspear Centre for Music & Edmonton Symphony Orchestra

Workshop West Playwrights Theatre

A Note on Language

This section is about why we use particular words

In this report we use the social model of disability, rejecting the idea that disability is an individual problem located in peoples' bodies and minds that must be solved by medical intervention. Instead the social model of disability states that disability is created by inaccessible architecture, policies and attitudes that exclude people from full participation in society. This research and report is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers. While Canada has officially adopted a rights-based model of disability which uses person-first language, we use language consistent with the social model of disability because of this focus on barrier removal.

This means:

- We refer to *disabled people* to acknowledge that people are disabled by society. *Impairment* refers to bodily or mental difference
- *Deaf* refers to the cultural and linguistic minority group who use American Sign Language (ASL)
- *Neurodivergent* refers to people whose brains function in ways outside societal understandings of normal
- We also use the language generally preferred by particular groups of disabled people, such as *autistic people* instead of *people with autism*, or *hard of hearing* instead of *people with hearing loss*
- Where we are aware that specific interviewees or participants in focus groups preferred particular disability language we have used that language

Method

This section is about how information about performing arts accessibility needs in Edmonton was collected.

In the summer of 2019, a group of Edmonton performing arts organizations came together to discuss how they could improve the accessibility of their programming. They decided they needed more information to guide how they would improve their accessibility. Therefore, this research asks, *what are the barriers facing Edmonton audiences to accessing the performing arts? And what are performing arts organizations currently doing to address those barriers?* With this information the researchers could map which barriers were being addressed, and which barriers were not, to inform the next steps of the performing arts organizations.

The researchers used a survey to engage a broad range of people and map the access needs of a wide variety of Edmontonians. The audience survey was written using a combination of open-ended questions, yes/no questions, and scales that asked respondents to agree or disagree with a statement. The survey was deliberately written in plain language, meaning that each sentence contained a single idea and common words were used. This was to make the survey accessible to people with cognitive impairment, people whose first language is not English, or for whom written English comprehension is a barrier. Respondents were asked about financial accessibility, physical accessibility, linguistic accessibility (ASL interpretation and captioning), sensory accessibility (audio description, touch tours, and sensory adapted performances) and social accessibility (relaxed performances and pre-show information). There was also a final open-ended question that asked, "Is there anything else you want us to know?". A video explaining the survey was created in ASL to provide context and information to the Deaf community. We received 202 responses to the survey.

We then used interviews and focus groups to explicate the survey results and to seek information from particular groups of people that we identified would experience barriers to the survey. These groups included Deaf people, people with cognitive impairment, a cross-disability group, a group of disabled artists, caregivers, and newcomers to Canada. As responses to the survey came in we identified a few gaps in the demographics of people who were responding to the survey, specifically Blind and

visually impaired people, queer people, autistic people, Black people and people of colour. To fill these gaps we exchanged emails with one visually impaired person who reached out to us by email, interviewed an autistic person, ran one focus group aimed at queer disabled people through partnership with the Pride Centre and conducted two interviews with staff from the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers.

There was also a survey created for performing arts organizations, asking about their outreach and accessibility efforts in order to understand what performing arts organizations are already doing to increase their accessibility. The survey was sent to 42 performing arts organizations and 22 organizations responded. Generally, if a particular barrier (e.g. financial accessibility) was addressed in the audience survey, then questions were also asked about it in the performing arts organization survey. We also conducted interviews with individuals from five organizations to explicate the results of the performing arts organizations' survey.

Limitations

This research is intended to guide the decisions and practice of Edmonton performing arts organizations and funders around accessibility. There are a number of factors that we want organizations and funders to keep in mind as they decide how to use this data. Specifically, we want to call attention to the scope of both the audience and performing arts organization focused survey, the difficulties created by open-ended questions, and questions around transferring the results of this research to the wider Edmonton context.

Scope:

- 1. Audience survey.** There are a number of accessibility measures that the survey did not address. This decision was made to make completing the survey (already quite long) accessible. The accessibility measures that were not included are: dementia-friendly performances, sober events, scent sensitivity, familiarization tours, way-finding videos, and 360-degree videos of spaces. Additionally, the survey did not ask in detail about specific aspects of physical accessibility, meaning that responses to the audience survey relied on respondents' knowledge of physical accessibility. Knowledge of physical accessibility is often difficult to acquire without lived experience of disability created by interacting with

the environment, close connection to disabled people, or professional knowledge. This may mean that ways to increase physical accessibility were not identified by respondents to the audience survey.

- 2. Organizational performing arts survey.** The survey was predominantly sent to theatre and dance organizations. Independent and commercial music venue managers and promoters were not consulted. Future research should reach out to more music organizations, especially given that the majority of respondents to the audience survey were interested in attending music events. As with the audience survey, the organizational survey did not ask in detail about specific aspects of physical accessibility. The responses relied on respondents' knowledge of physical accessibility, meaning the performing arts organizations may have over-estimated their physical accessibility.

Comparing Open-ended Data: The survey deliberately used open-ended questions for demographics information to prioritize respondents' self-identification. This sometimes made comparing data difficult. For example, many survey respondents, when writing about their gender wrote 'woman' or 'female'. It is impossible to know why each individual respondent chose the word they did and if these categories can be collapsed without loss of meaning. The performing arts organization survey asked organizations to write in the percentage of their programming that was associated with particular accessibility measure. Organizations would sometimes write the number of performances, making it impossible to determine the percentage of their programming that was accessible in a particular way.

Transferability to the wider context: It is difficult to know how precisely this research reflects the broad concerns of both Edmonton audiences and performing arts organizations. In the case of both audience respondents and the performing arts organizations, presumably the respondents are more invested in increasing the accessibility of the performing arts than the average audience member or organization.

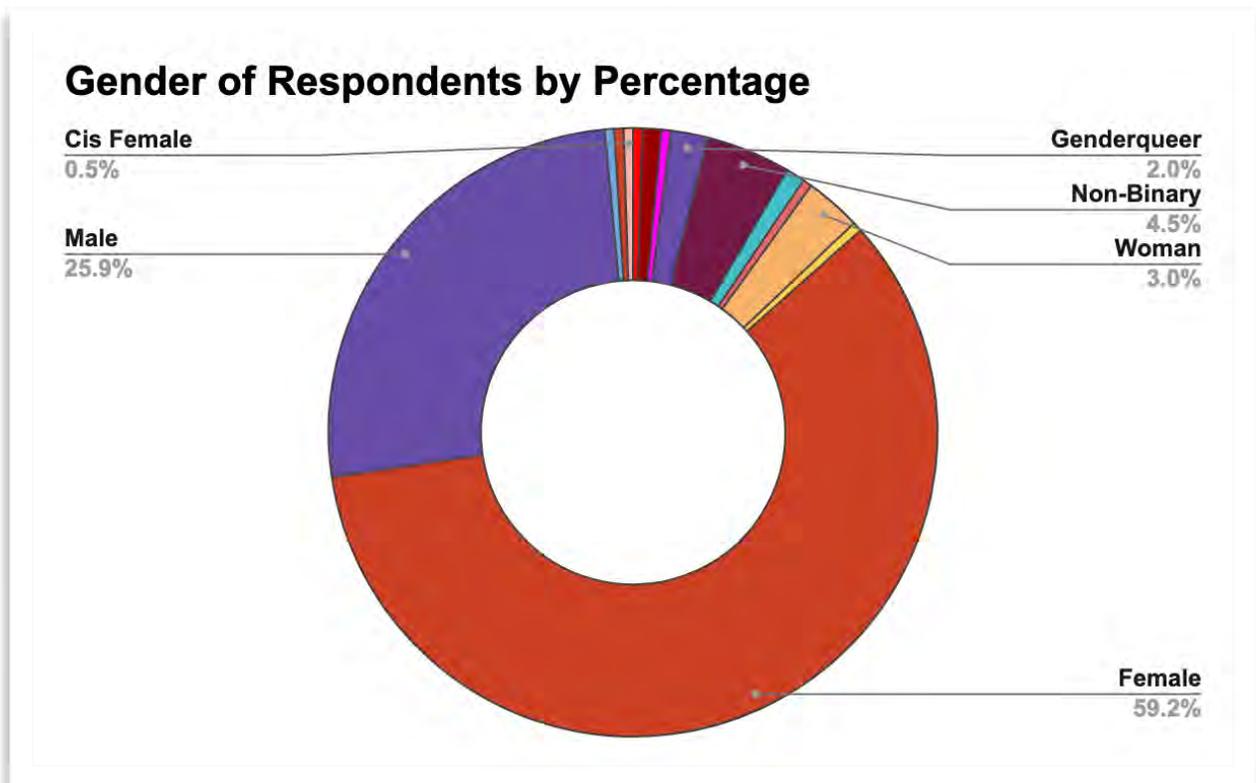
Audiences and Performing Arts Organizations

This section is about the people and organizations who responded to the surveys.

This research takes an intersectional approach to accessibility and barrier removal. This means that we assume that barriers to full participation in society, including participation in the performing arts, are experienced by a wide variety of people. Encountering barriers is not exclusive to disabled people. To better understand the barriers that prevent people from engaging with Edmonton's performing arts we asked a number of questions about who they were.

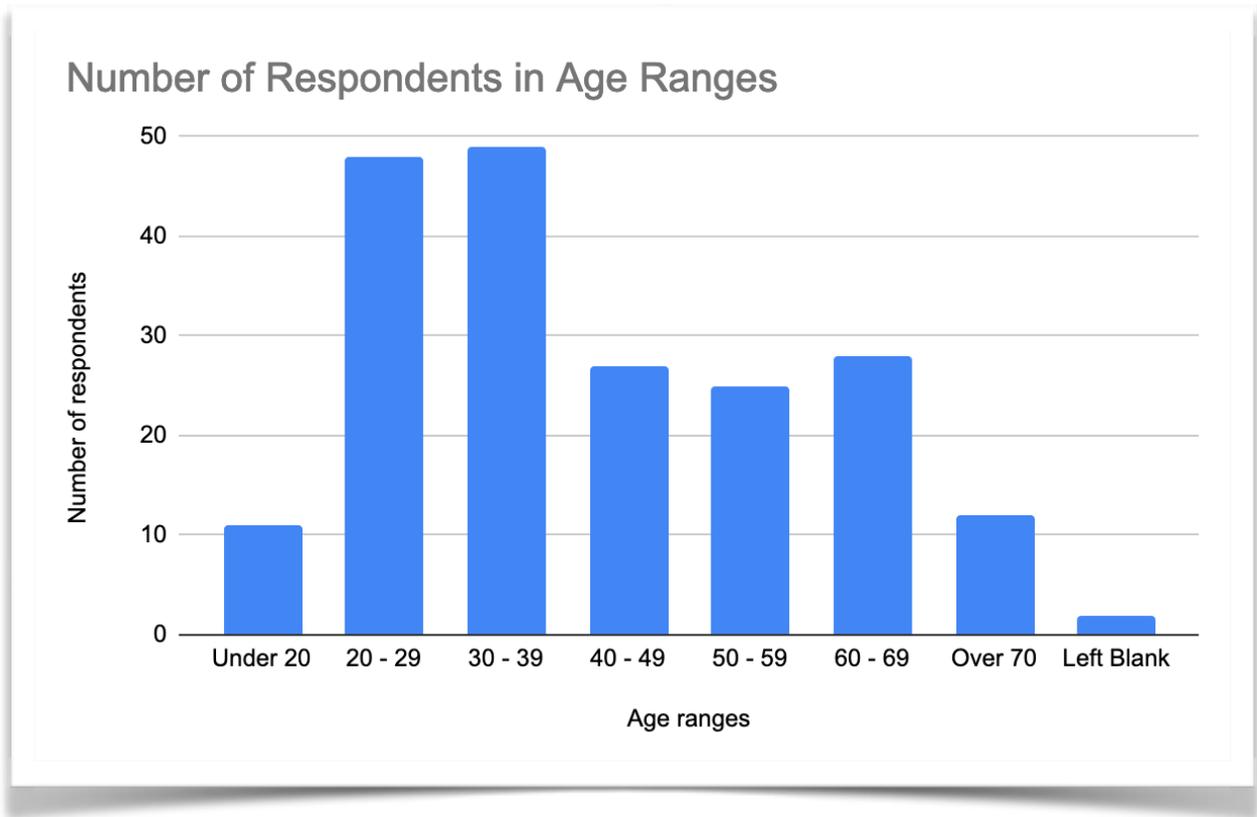
Gender

The majority of the respondents, 119 (59%), to the audience survey identified as female. Six (3%) identified as women, 1 (0.5%) as a cis woman, 1 (0.5%) as feminine and 1 (0.5%) as cis female. Fifty-two (26%) survey respondents identified as male, 1 (0.5%) as a trans male, 1 (0.5%) as a man and 2 (1%) as cis male. One (0.5%) respondent identified as queer, 1 (0.5%) as gender-fluid, 4 (2%) as genderqueer, 9 (4%) as non binary and 2 (1%) left the question blank.



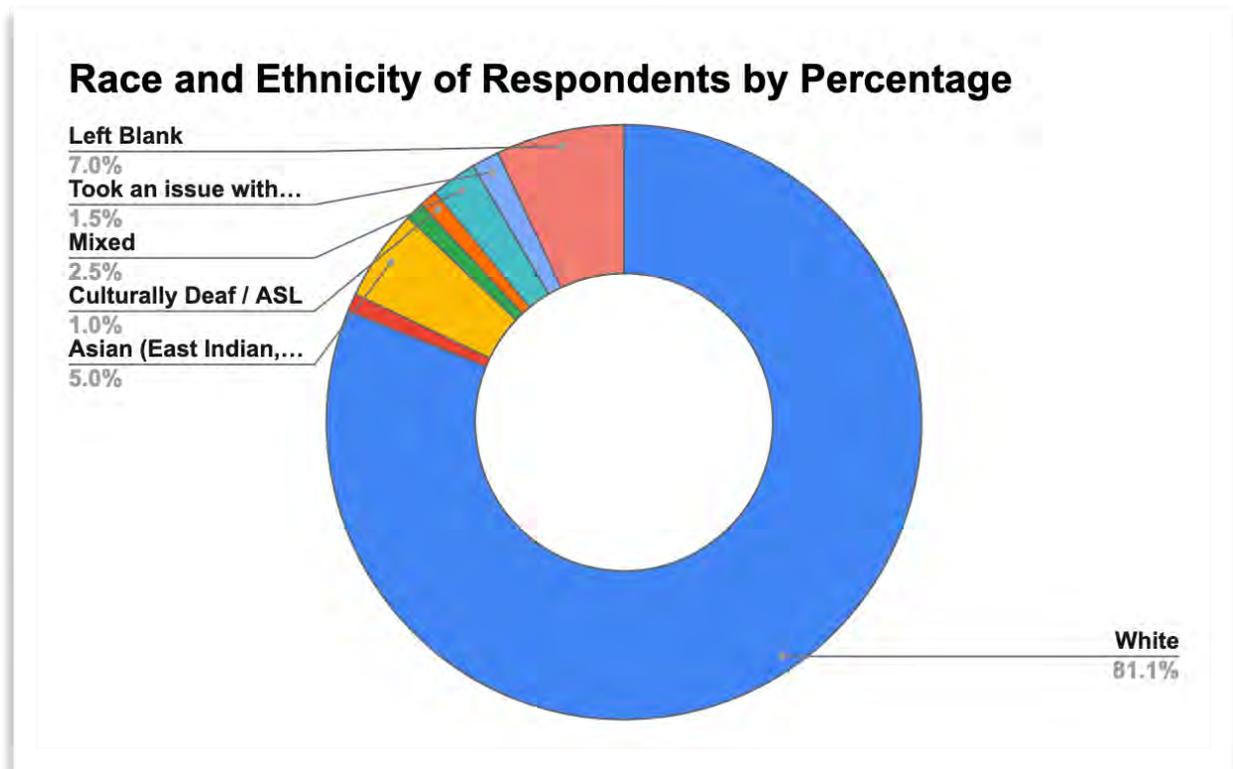
Age

The survey attracted a wide range of ages. Eleven (6%) were 19 or younger, 41 (21%) were 20 to 29 years old, 48 (24%) were 30 - 39 years old, 27 (14%) were 40 - 49 years old, 23 (12%) were 50 - 59 years old, 28 (14%) were 60 - 69 years old and 12 (6%) were over 70.



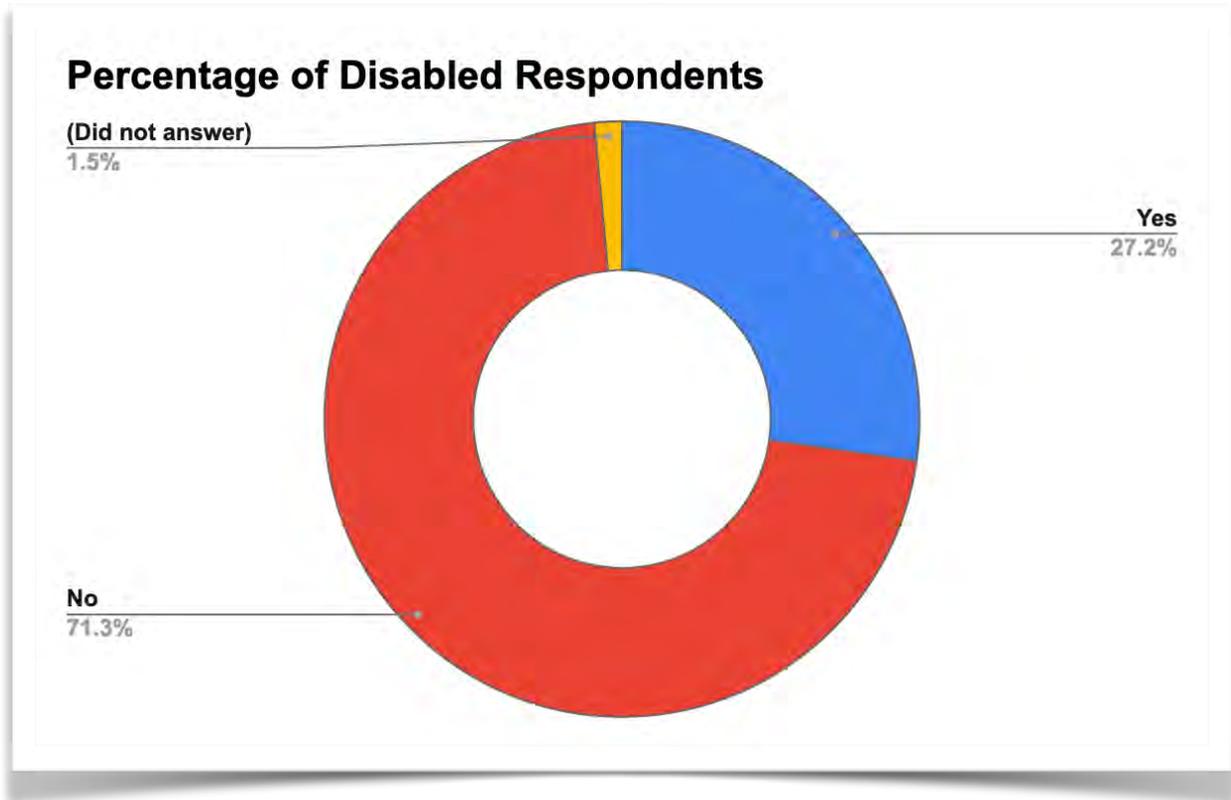
Race and Ethnicity

The audience survey respondents were overwhelmingly white, with 163 respondents (81%) identifying themselves as white, Caucasian, or of European heritage. Strikingly, none of the respondents identified as Black. Ten respondents (5%) identified themselves as Asian, including “South Asian”, “East Indian”, “Chinese” and “Hong Kong”. Five respondents (2%) identified as “mixed”, 2 (1%) as Metis, 1 (1%) as culturally Deaf, and 3 (1%) took issue with the question.



Disability

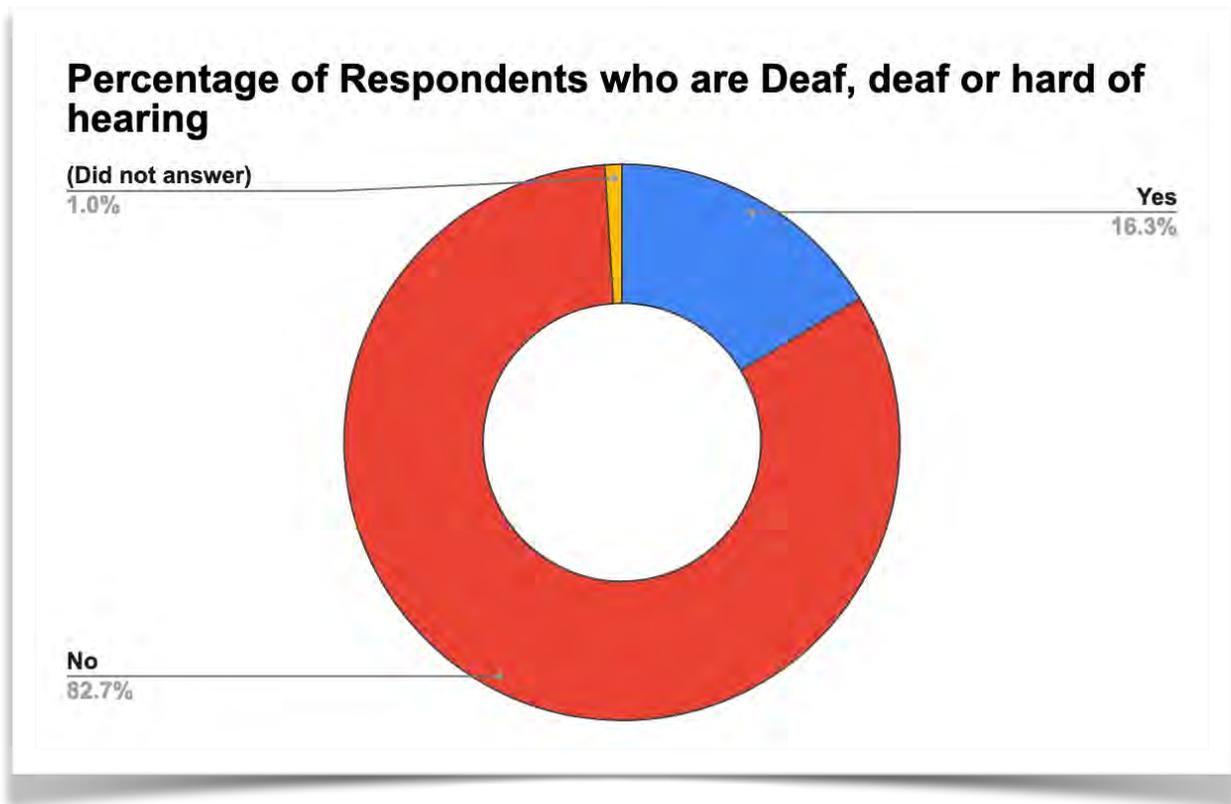
Statistics Canada notes that roughly one in five Canadians (22%) are disabled¹. This survey attracted the attention of a larger number of disabled people than would be expected to find in the average population, with 55 respondents (27%) identifying as disabled people. One hundred and forty-four (71%) did not identify as disabled and 3 respondents (1%) did not answer.



¹ Morris, S., Fawcett, G., Brisebois, L. & Hughes, J (2018) A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017. Statistics Canada. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2018002-eng.htm>

Deaf, deaf and hard of hearing

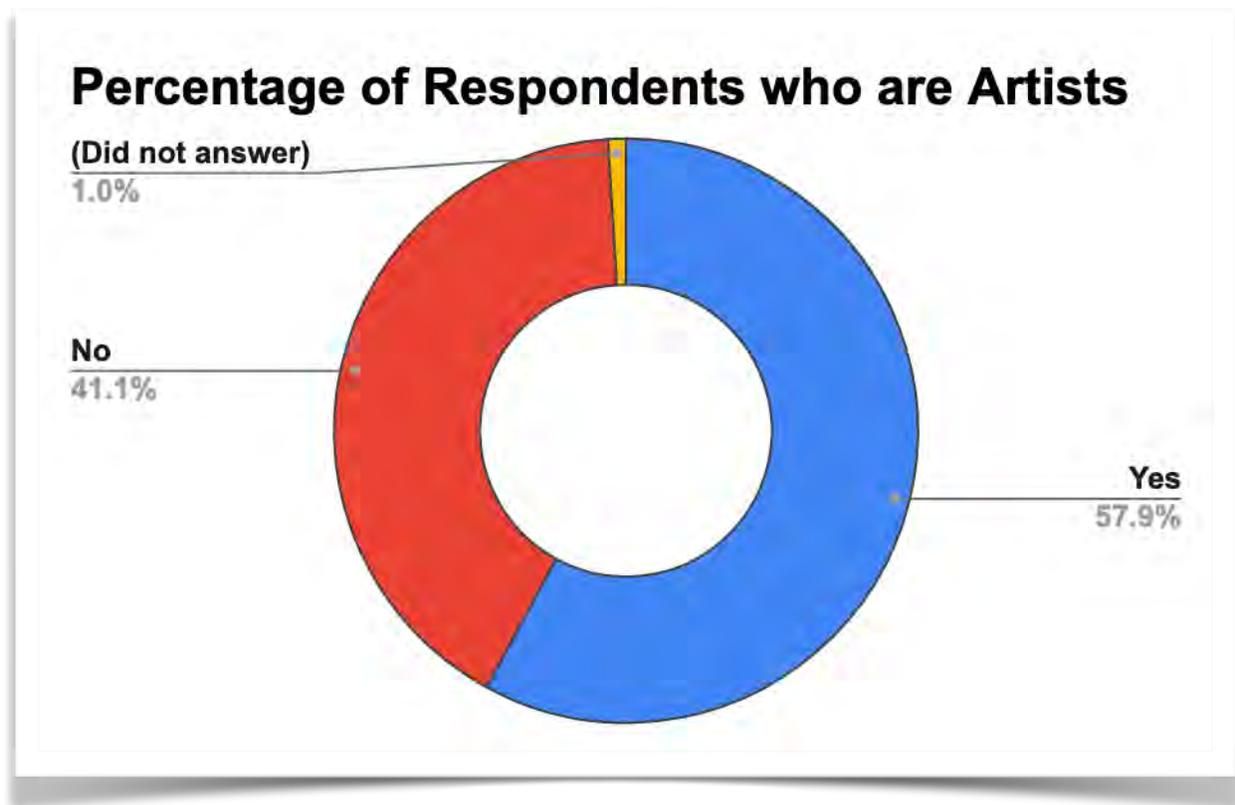
Thirty-three survey respondents (16%) identified themselves as Deaf, deaf, or hard of hearing and of those, 22 (11%) indicated that their primary language was ASL. The Canadian Association of the Deaf notes the difficulty of conducting meaningful research on the number of Deaf Canadians², but estimates that of 37 million Canadians, 370 000 are profoundly deaf or Deaf. This is approximately 0.01% of Canada's population. This suggests that the survey attracted a larger number of Deaf, deaf and hard of hearing people that would be expected to be found in the average population.



² Canadian Association for the Deaf. (2015) Statistics on Deaf Canadians. Canadian Association for the Deaf. Retrieved from: <http://cad.ca/issues-positions/statistics-on-deaf-canadians/>

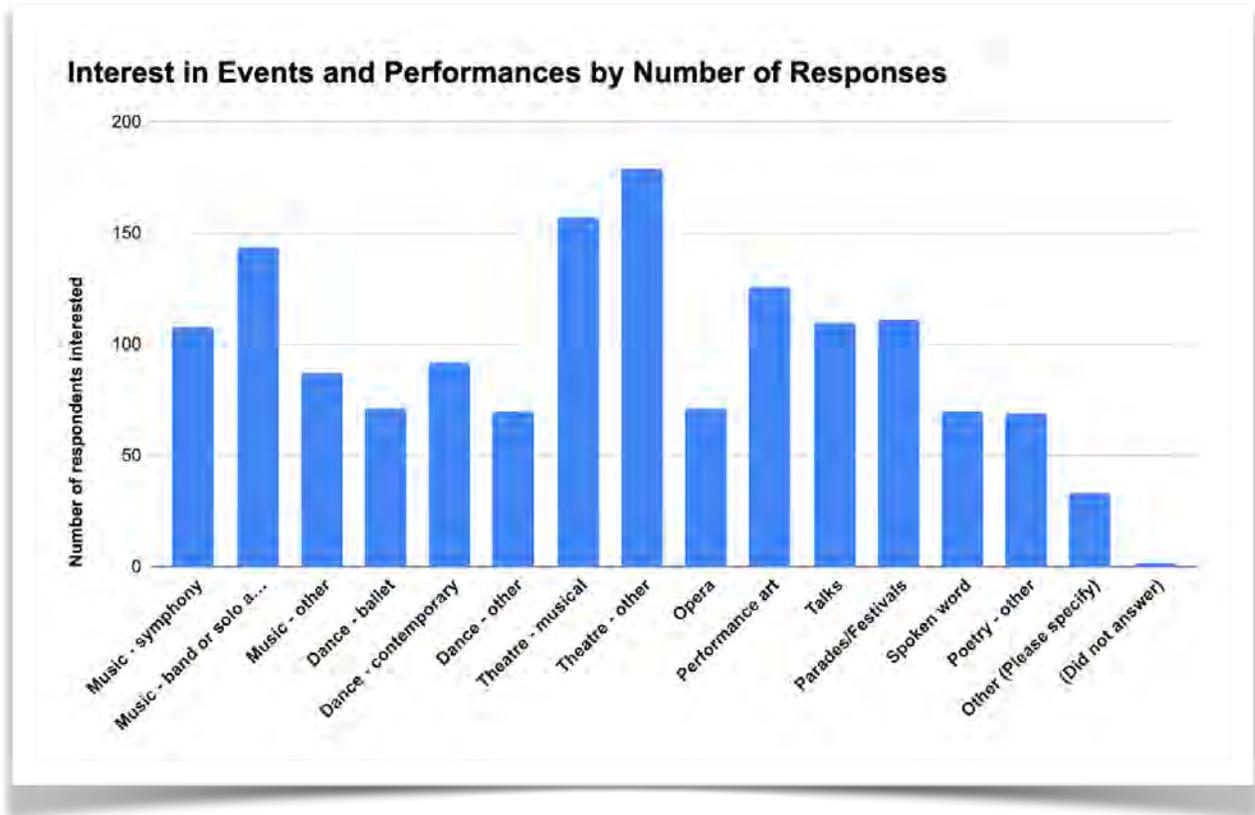
Artists

Most of the survey respondents, 117 (58%), identified as artists. In the focus groups, professional development was identified as an important reason to attend the performing arts. Eighty-three respondents (41%) said they were not artists and 2 (1%) did not answer. Theatre was the most common artistic discipline practiced by survey respondents, followed by music and visual arts, although many survey respondents wrote in multiple disciplines, or simply “multi-disciplinary”.



Types of Events and Performances

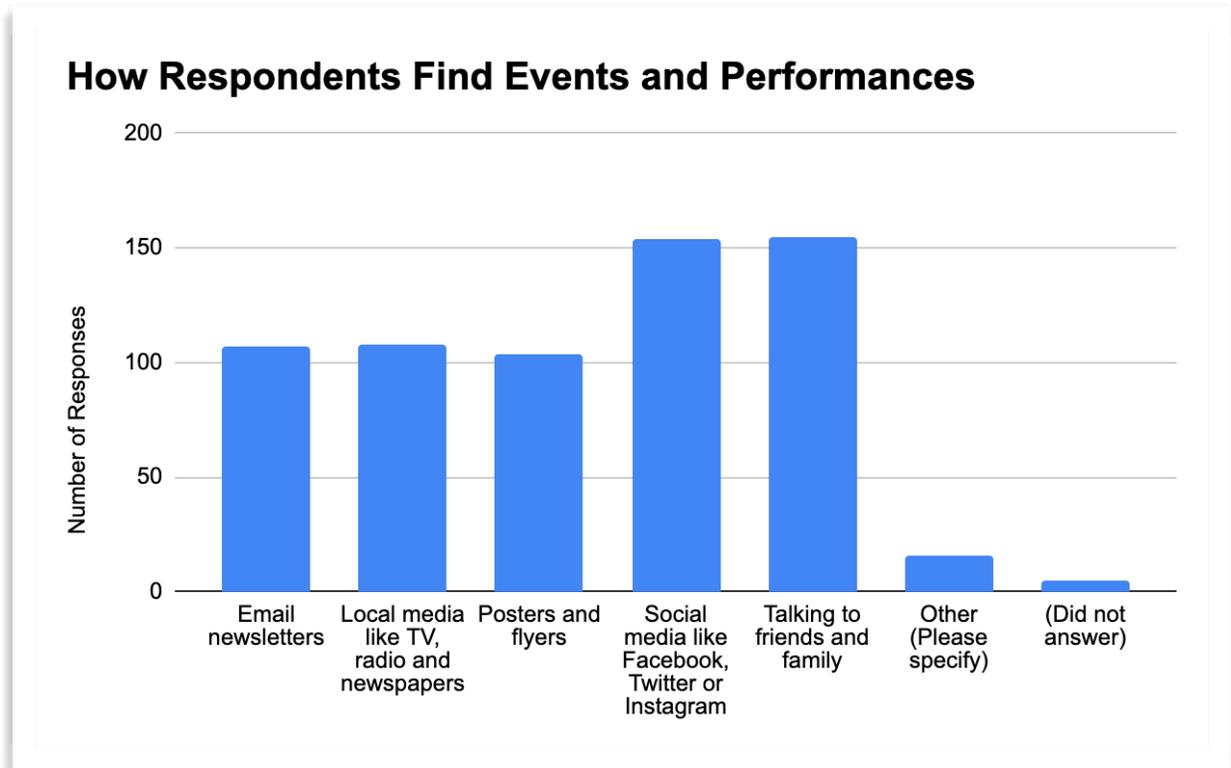
Survey respondents shared the types of events and performances they were interested in attending. Respondents were particularly interested in theatre and music events.



Asking about what performances and events survey respondents had attended recently created a more nuanced picture. While a few respondents noted that they had not attended anything because there were too many barriers, many of the responses revealed that audience members are interested in many genres of arts. For example, a single response could list improvisation shows, theatre at the Citadel, the Folk Music Festival, and talks. There was a subgroup of 8 people who exclusively listed theatre performances that had ASL interpretation or integrated Deaf performers. This suggests that the lack of ASL interpretation presents a significant barrier to these 8 people engaging with theatre.

Finding Out About Events and Performances

The survey also asked respondents how they found out about performing arts events and performances. The majority of people found out either by word of mouth or through social media.



Why Attend?

In addition to the people who attended the performing arts as a form of professional development, people attended the performing arts because:

- They wanted to enjoy themselves
- They wanted to be entertained
- They wanted to be informed or provoked
- They wanted to support local artists and their friends
- They wanted to experience community connection

The importance of community and social connections was clear both from the survey and the focus groups. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement, *I don't go to*

events or performances unless I go with friends or family 32 (16%) of the survey respondents strongly agreed and 50 (25%) agreed. Almost half of the survey respondents do not attend performances or events alone.

Participants in the Deaf focus group particularly highlighted how important the social elements of going to a performance or event was. They wanted opportunities to meet friends before and after the performance or event. They were clear that performing arts venues that supported social interactions like Deaf friendly cafes, bars and restaurants, particularly with staff who could speak ASL, were key to their enjoyment of the performing arts.

The focus group and interview participants often spoke about the importance of seeing their own lives and experiences reflected in the performances and events they attended. Performing arts that represented the lives of Deaf, disabled and otherwise marginalized people were valued by the participants. They were also interested in a broad range of topics and wanted to attend performing arts events that did not directly address their lived experiences. This demonstrates that there is a need for broad consideration of audience accessibility. Performing arts organizations should always be considering access, not just for performances and events that engage with Deaf and disability content.

Overall Survey Demographics

Overall, the respondents to the survey were predominantly white women. They identified as artists and found out about performing arts events from friends, family or on social media. The large number of respondents who identified as artists mirrors larger trends in performing arts attendance in Canada³. They were primarily interested in theatre and music events. This mirrors the findings of CAPACOA, which found that three in four Canadians attended a performing arts event in 2011 and of those, 44% attended a theatrical performance, 42% attended a popular music performance, 20% attended a classical music performance and 15% attended a dance performance⁴.

³ Ekos Research (2012). Survey of the General Public, the Value of Presenting: A Study of Arts Presentation in Canada. Ottawa, ON: Ekos Research. Retrieved from: https://capacoa.ca/valueofpresentingdoc/Survey_General_Public_Report.pdf

⁴ Petri, Inga (2013) The Value of Presenting, a Study of Performing Arts Presentation in Canada. Ottawa, ON: CAPACOA and Strategic Moves

Future research could engage with a wider diversity of people including:

- Seniors, particularly in regards to age-related impairment
- Black people and People of Colour
- Autistic, Mad and otherwise neurodivergent people
- Blind and visually impaired people
- LGBTQ+ people
- Caregivers, particularly parents of disabled children

Further research could also be done into socio-economic and educational status as Canada-wide research indicates both have strong correlations to engagement in the performing arts⁵.

Performing Arts Organizations

Twenty-two Edmonton performing arts organizations responded to this survey. These organizations work in the artistic disciplines of theatre, dance, choral music, symphony, opera and circus. Some organizations developed new productions and events, some presented them. One organization is a university, another is a provincial service organization. All were engaged in the performing arts, but in a wide diversity of artistic disciplines, with a wide diversity of practices and approaches.

Almost without exception organizations expressed that they were interested in making their work more accessible to Edmontonians. Every organization had some kind of access or outreach program in place. The organizations estimated they spent between 0% to 40% of their yearly budget on access, with the majority spending under 5% of their budget on access costs. Some organizations, because of their mission and the kind of art they produced or presented focused their outreach on particular groups. Some organizations focused their outreach efforts on groups that they believed encountered barriers to engaging with their art-form. Other organizations did outreach on a project by project basis, engaging with groups connected to the subject matter of a particular project. These organizations noted that retaining audiences and relationships after these projects were completed was difficult. Some organizations listed other not-for-profit organizations that they maintained relationships with in order to do outreach.

⁵Ekos Research (2012). Survey of the General Public, the Value of Presenting: A Study of Arts Presentation in Canada. Ottawa, ON: Ekos Research. Retrieved from: https://capacoa.ca/valueofpresentingdoc/Survey_General_Public_Report.pdf

All organizations did some kind of outreach or access work, demonstrating that they are interested in removing and minimizing barriers to people engaging with their work. Many organizations wrote in on the final question that they were interested in learning more about how to make their events and performances more accessible. The major barriers they identified to making more of their events and performances accessible were cost and lack of knowledge.

Barriers and Accessibility

This section examines barriers to audiences engaging with performing arts in Edmonton and ways of removing those barriers.

After asking about respondents to the audience survey about who they are, the survey then asked about a number of barriers to engagement with the performing arts and methods to remove these barriers. Focus groups and interviews were used to add detail and better understand the survey results. The barriers and ways to remove these barriers are grouped into:

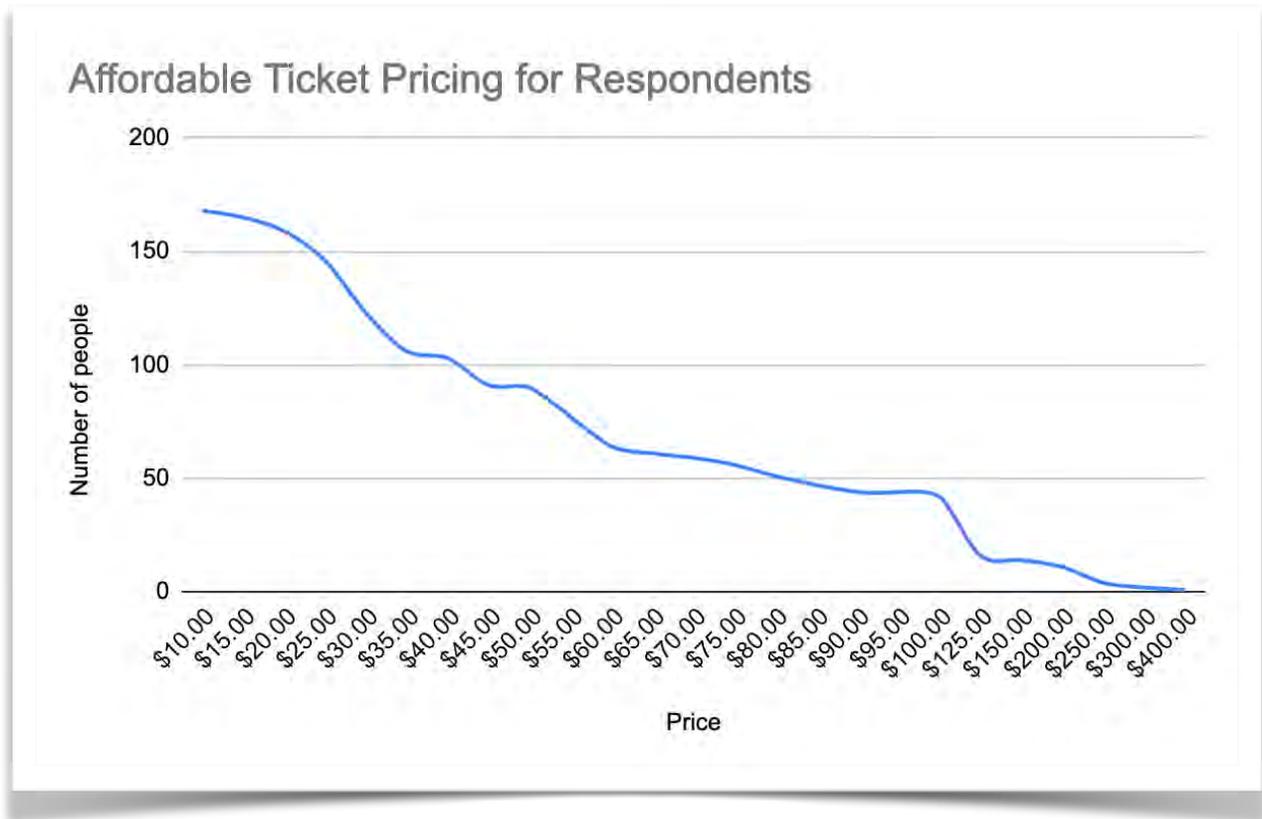
- Financial accessibility
- Transportation and physical accessibility
- ASL Interpretation
- Captioning
- Hearing loop systems
- Audio description and touch tours
- Relaxed performances
- Pre-show information
- Equity of experience

For each of these barriers or access methods the results of the audience survey and focus groups are summarized. Then current Edmonton practices, based on the performing arts organization survey and interviews, are summarized. Based on the gaps between the needs identified in the survey and focus groups and current performing arts organizations practices we make recommendations. Relaxed performances and pre-show information are both a collection of practices. Both of these sections are broken down into the distinct practices and we compare and contrast the data on each practice from the audience survey and focus groups with current performing arts organization practices.

Financial Accessibility

Financial accessibility was a reoccurring theme across all focus groups and interviews. The price of the performing art event strongly affected respondents' decisions to attend an event. When survey respondents were asked, *what is an*

unaffordable ticket price for you? respondents' answers varied greatly. The answers varied from \$15.00 to \$400. Twenty-two (11%) indicated that \$25.00 was unaffordable and 17(8%) indicated that \$30.00 was unaffordable. Twenty-eight respondents (14%) indicated that a ticket price higher than \$50.00 was unaffordable to them. Twenty-five respondents (12%) indicated that a ticket price higher than \$100 was unaffordable.



Respondents to the survey also noted that their answer would change depending on the type of event (e.g. weekend music festival, independent dance show, musical theatre) and depending on changes in their own finances.

How and when cheaper tickets were made available came up often in the focus groups and interviews, and several major barriers were identified:

1. **Student and Senior Pricing.** Participants indicated that when performing arts organizations named the types of people who could access cheaper tickets (e.g. students and senior pricing) this did not adequately reflect the diversity of people

who might benefit from reduced pricing.

2. **Specific Pay-What-You-Can Performances and Events.** It was difficult to attend specific dates for pay-what-you-can performances and events. Participants appreciated organizations, such as Fringe Theatre, who keep a particular percentage of pay-what-you-can or discounted tickets for each performance.
3. **Pricing of Accessible Seating.** Participants expressed frustration with performances where accessible seating (e.g. physically accessible seating or seating closer to the stage for Deaf patrons) cost more than other options. One focus group attendee suggested that Edmonton cultural events could be added to the City of Edmonton's Leisure Access Pass, giving recipients of this pass access to accessible seating at cultural events at steeply reduced prices or free.
4. **Access Companion Tickets.** Participants also highlighted the significant barrier of additional costs for disabled people who require an access companion (someone who is providing necessary care for the disabled person) to attend performances or events with them. While this is only a small group of people (7 respondents to the survey and 1 focus group participant) this was highlighted as a particularly significant cost.

Ultimately, financial barriers may also indicate of a lack of time and other resources. A queer interviewee who was not working brought up that with the pressures of trying to find work and stay afloat while unemployed, events she was interested in often happened before she knew about them, even if she could afford them. This was echoed in an interview with an employee of the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers. The employee noted that the only affordable ticket price for newcomers is free. Additionally, when people are newcomers to Canada, seeing the performing arts cannot be a priority because there are so many other things in their lives that need to be a priority. The employee tried to make connections when performing arts organizations reached out because they had noticed that the performing arts often created positive memories that were an important step for newcomers beginning to considering

Edmonton home. But there was also a tremendous amount of work involved in organizing this, from arranging childcare to explaining what was going to happen at the event over telephone with each client. Receiving free tickets meant hours of staff time to get newcomers to the event or performance.

Current Edmonton Practices

All of the performing arts organizations were aware of the need for affordable pricing. Almost all of them offer some free or pay-what-you-can events or tickets. Only 2 organizations' lowest ticket price was above \$30.00. This is an area where Edmonton performing arts has clearly worked to reduce the financial barriers to people engaging with the arts. The majority of the companies indicated that they provide free access companion seating, and another four indicated that they had not thought of this, but would be open to it. However, none of the organizations made this publicly clear – they only provided access companion tickets if people called and asked for them. The majority of the performing arts organizations were very aware of the need for affordable ticket prices and had some kind of program in place to make their events or performances more financially accessible.

Recommendations:

1. **Communicate that access companion tickets are free.** All performing arts organizations should be providing free access companion tickets. This is a standard practice across much of the English-speaking performing arts world. The lack of clear communication from performing arts companies meant the participant in the focus groups who did need an access companion believed that she needed to pay for the additional ticket. Making the availability of access companion tickets and the method for booking clear on organizations' websites is an essential step to improve access for many organizations.
2. **Adopt a percentage pay-what-you-can structure.** The participants in the focus groups were clear that setting aside a certain percentage of tickets for each performance that were discounted or pay-what-you-can, and allowing people to identify themselves as someone who needed to use pay-what-you-can (without

the student or senior label) removed the most financial barriers to them attending performing arts events.

3. **Price access seats at the cheapest price level.** When organizations use fixed seating instead of general, pricing access seats at the same price as the cheapest seats will remove additional financial barriers. In the case of Deaf or Blind audience members who need to be seated close to the stage, performing arts organizations could set aside specific seats for this purpose or provide an access ticket price.

Transportation and Physical Accessibility

Getting to performing arts venues or event locations and moving around inside was a major concern for respondents and participants. Availability of parking emerged as a major issue for respondents. Ninety-nine survey respondents (49%) indicated that the availability of parking made them more likely to attend a performing arts event. Sixty-six respondents (33%) indicated that bus routes were a factor that determined if they would attend an event. In addition, survey respondents highlighted that having clear, safe pathways from the available parking to the venue was a key part of physical accessibility, especially in Edmonton's winters.

Twenty-seven respondents (13%) strongly agreed that they based their decision to attend a performing arts event on the physical accessibility of the space and 31 respondents (15%) agreed with this statement. When asked about the kinds of physical accessibility they thought about most respondents replied that step-free access, powered doors, and physically accessible washrooms were important to them. Their responses also highlighted a number of concerns with the physical access of specific Edmonton performing arts venues. Areas of improvement included:

- The lack of seating options for patrons who did not use mobility tools but who could not climb stairs
- The lack of fat-friendly seating
- Audience rakes that were too steep
- Stairs that were not marked by colour contrast
- The lack of accessible seating that was not at the very back of the auditorium

- The lack of accessible seating that allowed audience members sit side-by-side with friend or aid who does not use a mobility tool
- Having to call the box office to book accessible seating, rather than booking tickets online

Gender neutral washrooms, particularly planned and dedicated ones, were also an important aspect of physical accessibility with one respondent noting that temporary gender neutral washrooms made them “nervous”. Making it clear that gender accessibility is a part of day-to-day operations is an important way to make patrons feel safe.

The availability of parking was the major concern for most survey respondents when considering how they would get to a performing arts event. Response to the survey and focus group discussions revealed major physical barriers to respondents accessing the performing arts. There were some common concerns, but many of these barriers were specific to particular venues.

Current Edmonton Practices

Overall, the performing arts organizations that responded to the survey had an understanding of the physical barriers their spaces presented, although only 9 out of the 22 organizations had access audited their spaces. Physical access, however, is very complex. Often disabled people find the accessibility standards mandated by legislation (or in the case of Alberta, suggested by the Barrier Free Design Guide) insufficient. Organizations faced challenges raising funds to make older buildings, or buildings not originally intended for performing arts, accessible. Some of the organizations identified the fact that they rent venues as a barrier to knowing the physical barriers in their spaces. One organization, however, wrote that they had made an effort to stop renting physically inaccessible spaces. Organizations that do not own their venues can remove barriers to potential audience members by simply not renting inaccessible spaces.

An interview with a small venue revealed the difficulties of designing and building accessible space. The venue explained that when they redesigned their theatre they designed it to fit the maximum number of seats in the square footage that allowed to maintain their status as an “F” house under Canadian Actors Equity Association definitions. Expanding the square footage of the audience seating would have changed

their classification, resulting in them paying more in fees. These restrictions created a steep rake for audience seating that several survey and focus group respondents singled out as being inaccessible. Performing arts organizations face multiple barriers to improving the physical accessibility of their space from the cost and expertise required to retrofit buildings, to policies that penalize them for building or renovating for accessibility.

Recommendations

1. **Organizations, particularly those that own their venues should invest in disabled-led access audits to determine priorities for change.** As capitol projects can be difficult and expensive, each venue will need to under-take individualized consultation to determine priorities for change.

ASL Interpretation

Asking about ASL interpretation generated some of the most complex results in this study. The focus groups were well attended, with 9 people who identified as Deaf and hard of hearing attending across 2 focus groups. Twenty-three (11%) of the respondents to the survey identified ASL as their primary language, suggesting that a significant number of Deaf people in Edmonton are invested in the performing arts. However, when the researchers attempted to contact two major Deaf organizations, they were only able to secure an interview with one member long after the survey had closed. There may be Deaf, deaf or hard of hearing individuals who were unaware of this research.

The survey revealed strong individual preferences for particular interpreters with respondents singling out Deaf and Hear Alberta, Deaf Spectrum, Choice of Interpreters, Hope Lagaden, and Nicole Sanders and NICA, as particularly skilled interpreters. Audience responses to the survey and one of the interviews emphasized the need for trained interpreters. Poor translation was alienating and disappointing experience. One respondent highlighted the need for interpreters to have years of experience translating literary texts to do theatrical interpretation.

Deaf, deaf and hard of hearing survey respondents and focus group participants were particularly interested in theatre. Some respondents were interested in

interpreted theatre. Other comments, however, indicated that respondents were only interested in Deaf theatre because they believed that interpretation should be for hearing audiences. Many of the survey respondents and participants in the focus groups spoke about the importance of integrated interpretation in theatre, where interpreters are part of the action, instead of interpreting on the side. These results mirror current debates in London theatre around the value of interpreted and integrated theatre⁶. While outside the scope of this research, these responses strongly suggest that there is a desire for Deaf theatre companies to develop work in ASL in Edmonton.

Current Edmonton Practices

Of the 22 performing arts organizations who responded to the survey, 5 provided ASL interpretation. Two noted that they were dance companies, stating that they believed ASL interpretation was not needed. Given that the participants in the Deaf focus group highlighted the importance of social events surrounding performances and events, and of front-line staff who signed, this assumption may be erroneous. Of the 5 organizations that provided ASL interpretation, with the exception of Sound Off! the Deaf theatre Festival, which has interpreters for all of its programming, most organizations provided interpretation for between 1% and 25% of their programming. Two of these 5 organizations worked with a Deaf consultant and interpreter to choose the programming that was interpreted and the other 2 provided interpretation when it seemed like there was content that directly related to Deaf experience (e.g. a concert that engaged with Beethoven's deafness).

The cost of interpretation emerged as a major concern for performing arts organizations. Interpretation is a high skilled service, requiring years of training and costs accordingly. One arts organization stated that they provide ASL interpretation only when they get project grant funding or foundation support for it - they cannot afford to provide it as part of their ongoing costs. An artist interviewed also noted that they feel uncomfortable, particularly in more integrated productions, with the pay discrepancy between the theatre professionals and interpreters. It is clear, however, from the responses to the audience survey that there is a group of Deaf people in Edmonton who

⁶Unlimited (2018) Is sign language interpreted theatre effective? Unlimited. Retrieved from: <https://weareunlimited.org.uk/deafinitely-theatre-discussion/>

are deeply committed to the performing arts, particularly theatre, and lack of ASL interpretation presents a major barrier to their continued involvement with theatre and potentially, to their numbers growing.

Recommendations

1. **List the name of the interpreter or interpreting team at point of sale.**

Respondents had strong and very diverse opinions about the interpreters they enjoyed. Making it clear which interpreter or interpreting agency is providing interpretation on all publicity, marketing material and at point of sale is an important marketing tool for performing arts organizations.

2. **Centralized online listing of ASL interpreted and other accessible performances.**

Our difficulties connecting with major Deaf organizations, and the interview with the staff from the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers point to the problems of doing outreach through other not-for-profit organizations. Not-for-profit organizations can often be overstretched and may find it difficult to respond to needs that seem peripheral to their primary mission. One Deaf interviewee pointed out that access to theatre was a low priority for the Deaf community, given the lack of access to crucial services like hospitals, police and legal advice. Edmonton performing arts organizations need to find a way to advertise accessible performing arts events directly to individuals in tandem with outreach efforts to Deaf organizations.

3. **Funders should support the development of performance by Deaf creators.**

There is clearly a desire for Deaf-led performing arts in Edmonton, particularly Deaf-led theatre. Funders should be looking for opportunities to support emerging Edmonton Deaf talent.

4. **Beyond this, major sector-wide changes are needed to address the financial barriers to performing arts organizations providing ASL interpretation.** There are a few options to advocate for:

A. Dedicated access funding for audiences from funders.

Disability arts and accessibility activists in Canada and the UK have informally proposed a project and operating funding model for audience accessibility measures that would require artists and organizations to apply for funds specifically for audience access. This mirrors the Canada Council for the Arts' current model for artist accessibility that asks artists to submit a separate grant for dedicated access costs. This model would create funds for audience accessibility, and prevent funds for accessibility from being reallocated to other areas of an organization or production's budget. It would also acknowledge the high costs of accessibility measures like ASL interpretation, audio description, and live captioning by providing a dedicated funding stream for these access measures.

B. Local access fund. On an Edmonton level, organizations could work with local funders explore the development of a fund to provide grants towards outreach and access costs for local performing arts organizations. We recommend that these grants be awarded by a jury of Deaf, disabled, racialized, queer and otherwise marginalized people.

C. Developing theatrical interpretation training programs and resources. There is a clear need for professional development for theatrical interpreters. Development of workshops and trainings would mirror the robust offers of certificates and workshops for theatrical BSL interpreters in the UK. Funders that are invested in addressing sector-wide issues (like the Canada Council for the Arts) should look for opportunities to fund these kinds of initiatives.

Captioning

Captioning is the practice of displaying text of the dialogue and descriptions of the sounds in a performance. It is commonly used by deaf, hard of hearing, and some neurodivergent audience members. An overwhelming 103 survey respondents (51%), however, indicated that if performing arts events made captioning available they would use it. Responses to captioning in the focus groups was similarly supportive. Like ASL interpretation, survey respondents were most interested in captioning for art forms like theatre, poetry and talks that involve rely on spoken words. The type of performing arts events that respondents would most like captioning for included:

- Musical theatre
- Theatre
- Talks
- Poetry
- Opera

Several major models for captioning exist:

- Open captioning* is where captions are provided on a screen or on an LED display set up beside or above the performance or event space. The captioning is not integrated into the design of the performance or event and there may be preferred seating for captioning users. It is called open captioning because the captions can be seen by almost everyone attending the event.
- Integrated captioning* is where the captions are worked into the design of the show. They are usually placed in a central location where the entire audience can see them.
- Closed captioning* in performing arts, like close captioning in films and video, refers to captioning that viewers opt into. Currently there are three major models of closed captioning for performing arts - captioning to handheld devices provided to the audience, cell phone captioning apps, and the National Theatre's captioning glasses. In captioning to handheld devices the captioner provides tablets that audience members hold, or are hung on the back of the seat in front of the person using the captioning. In the case of cell phone apps, such as GalaPro or the

Difference Engine, users download the app and the captions appear on the person's phone. Gala Pro is intended for large theatres doing long runs and offers users the option to adjust colour, brightness, and size of the captioning on their mobile device. The Difference Engine was developed for site specific performance. In the case of the National Theatre's captioning glasses, the user picks up a set of the glasses (which can fit over the users glasses) and wears them through the performance. GalaPro, the Difference Engine and the National Theatre's model can offer patrons the option of attending any performance, although Gala Pro and the Difference Engine still rely on a captioning operator attending each performance. Gala Pro and the National Theatre's captioning glasses are both more effective for longer runs. In the case of GalaPro, the longer run is necessary to make the investment of the dedicated Wi-Fi network, and uploading the captioning to the app cost-effective. In the case of the National Theatre's glasses a longer run is necessary to make the glasses work effectively because they depend on voice recognition. A longer run allows the software time to improve recognition of actors' voices, resulting in less skipping and stalling of the captioning glasses as the run goes on.

- D. *Live captioning* is used in circumstances where there is no pre-existing script. Talks, improvised performances and theatre or dance talk-backs are all examples of where live captioning could be used. In live captioning, a captioner writes in machine shorthand at a rate of approximately 225 words per minute, which their computer program then translates into English text. This text can be projected onto a screen or connected to tablets. Like ASL interpreters, particular captioners specialize in particular types of captioning by maintaining specialized vocabulary in their repertoire. The costs of live captioning are similar to ASL interpretation.

Overall, the respondents to the survey strongly indicated that they preferred open and integrated captioning. In the focus groups several people indicated that even though they did not identify as deaf, or hard of hearing they would prefer to see events and performances with captioning, indicating the broad appeal of this accessibility measure.

Current Edmonton Practices

Currently 4 performing arts organizations in Edmonton provide captioning. One provides open captioning, another provides integrated captioning and another sometimes presents artists who have chosen to provide open or integrated captioning. The fourth, a professional choir, provides printouts of the songs sung in performance, effectively captioning their songs, but not the other elements of the performance. Two other organizations used captions, if they were available, when presenting films. The organizations caption either 5% of their performances or events or 100% of their performances and events, increasing the choice available to audience members, and participants who need or want to access captioning. The major barrier to providing captioning was cost, particularly for captioning in large venues. Live captioning in particular, because of the highly skilled nature of the work, can be cost-prohibitive. Captioning of scripted work in smaller venues, however, can be cheap (at least compared to other accessibility measures) as it can have very minimal technical requirements and the major costs are the time and skill of the captioner.

Recommendation:

1. **Performing arts organizations should consider increasing the number of events and performances they caption.** Given that the majority of the respondents to the audience survey preferred open and integrated captioning Edmonton performing arts can draw on the expertise that L'UniThéâtre has in integrated captioning. L'UniThéâtre moved this year to captioning 100% of their French language performances in English. With their captioner, Julia Seymour, they have experimented with the captioning, from working to determine the optimal height of their captioning in their theatre, to trying colour to distinguish who is speaking. L'UniThéâtre have a wealth of knowledge to share with the broader Edmonton performing arts community about integrated captioning.

Hearing Loop Systems

Hearing loops are systems where sound is captured by a microphone and transmitted directly to a user's hearing aid through a magnetic field. This greatly reduces background and competing noise. Only 6 respondents (3%) to the audience

survey used hearing loop systems. For one participant in the focus groups, however, access to a t-coil system was essential to their access and enjoyment of the performance. They expressed frustration at how often the hearing loop systems did not work, and with front-of-house staff's uncertainty about where the equipment was, how to use it, and how to fix it.

Current Edmonton Practices

Six of the 22 Edmonton performing arts companies used spaces that had hearing loop systems. Another 4 sometimes used venues that had hearing loop systems, but not all the time.

Recommendations:

- 1. Front of House and other front-line staff should be trained and familiar with how to use and operate hearing loops.** Organizations should have a clear escalation policy for front-line staff to follow if the hearing loop is not working.
- 2. Venues and organizations should be testing hearing loop systems regularly to ensure they are working for patrons.**

Audio Description

Audio description is the practice of describing what is visible. It is commonly used by Blind people, visually impaired people, and some neurodivergent people. Audio description in performing arts is often whispered or delivered over headset. Approaches to audio description range from pragmatic descriptions that allow the listener to interpret for themselves, as championed by Joel Snyder⁷ to the artistic, including Laurel Lawson's Audimance app. The Audimance app, created for use on Kinetic Light's dance piece *Descent*, allows audio description users to choose from multiple tracks responding to the performance ranging from description of the movement, to poetry and dramatic dialogue written in response to the dance⁸. Audio description can also be only

⁷ Snyder, J. (2014) *The Visual Made Verbal*. Indianapolis, IN: Dog Ear Publishing

⁸Hamraie, A. & Sheppard, A (2020) *Contra** Episode 2.1: Performance with Alice Sheppard. *Contra**. Retrieved from: <https://www.mapping-access.com/podcast>

accessed by people who want to access it, or integrated into the script of a performance. Extant, a theatre company of visually impaired professional artists in

“More accessibility to visually impaired patrons would be fantastic. There is so little accessibility in a world that can already be prohibitively expensive”

London, has also developed a set of alternative solutions that they train theatre companies in to enhance accessibility for visually impaired audience members when audio description is not available.

Thirty-five respondents (17%) indicated that if audio description and touch tours were available they would use them. When asked about the type of performance they

would like to access through audio description and touch tours the following genres of performance were most popular:

- Theatre - musical (15 responses)
- Theatre - other (14 responses)
- Performance art (13 responses)
- Museums, galleries or visual art (written in by 11 people)
- Dance - contemporary (11 responses)
- Parades and festivals (11 responses)

Current Practices in Edmonton

Only 1 performing arts organization indicated that they do audio description. From their description of the audio description, however, it was not clear if what was provided was a narrator character who would sometimes describe the stage action or an integrated audio describer providing equal access to the visual elements of a performance.

Recommendation:

1. **Performing arts organizations should consider providing audio description and touch tours.** It is clear that Edmonton performing arts organizations are not serving Blind, visually impaired patrons, and other patrons who might want to access audio description and touch tours. Audio description, however, like ASL

interpretation and live captioning, can be costly because it requires a skilled describer. If Edmonton performing arts organizations are interested in developing audio description in Edmonton there may be opportunities to partner with museums and galleries to establish this practice here. Likely, significant outreach work will need to be done to build an audience that has historically not been served by the performing arts. Like ASL interpretation and live captioning the costs of audio description would need to be supported by sector-wide to change towards greater financial support for organizations to provide accessibility for their audiences.

Elements of Relaxed Performances

Relaxed performances were initially developed for theatre. Relaxed performances make the performing arts accessible to a wide range of people who might benefit from a more relaxed approach to performance etiquette and adjustments to the sensory environment, including neurodivergent people, people with children, and people who have not attended performing arts before.

There are several different models of relaxed performances world-wide, multiple names for relaxed performances, and controversy exists about what a relaxed performance involves. For example, relaxed performance can refer to the model developed by the Society of London Theatres (SOLT)⁹ which involves providing a visual story, providing a chill out space, adjusting lighting and sound levels, and adopting a relaxed attitude to sound and movement by the audience. A similar model was developed in New York by the Theatre Development Fund's Autism Initiative. An alternative model, developed by Touretteshero, involves not altering the sensory element of a performance, but adopting a relaxed attitude to audience noise and movement, with an emphasis on a pre-show announcement explaining to the audience what is involved in a relaxed performance, and providing comprehensive pre-show information, including information about the sensory elements of the show. Disability arts communities across the English-speaking world have also adjusted these models to suit the needs of their communities.

⁹ Potter, S. (2013) Relaxed Performance Project Evaluation Report 2012/2013. London, UK: Society of London Theatres

This report treats relaxed performances as a collection of practices, rather than a strict list of requirements. It is important, however, to note that the elements of a relaxed performance are related. For example, if you are inviting a theatre audience to come and go, and move as they need to, the audience will feel more comfortable doing this if the house lights are slightly up. Comprehensive pre-show information, including a visual story, also considered part of a relaxed performance, but will be addressed in the next section.

Several of the performing arts organizations noted that they used elements of relaxed performances specifically for their children's programming. While children will benefit from the relaxed performance format, it is equally important that adults who would benefit from a relaxed performance also have the opportunity to access a full range of programming. Below we summarize the responses from the survey, focus groups and interviews to specific elements of relaxed performance.

- 1. Audiences or participants are welcome to come and go from the performance space at anytime.**

Twenty-seven respondents (13%) to the survey strongly agreed with the statement *I am more likely to go to an event or performance if I can come and go from the space at anytime* and 45 respondents (23%) agreed. Focus group participants were also very supportive of this element of relaxed performance.

Of the performing arts organizations, 15 use this element of relaxed performances for some of their performances, with the percentage of each organization's performances varying from 5% to 100% of those performances.

- 2. Audiences or participants are welcome to move, sit and make noise.**

Eighteen survey respondents (9%) strongly agreed and another 31 (15%) agreed that *being able to move, sit, and make noise as they needed to* would make them more likely to attend a performing arts event.

Of the performing arts organizations, 12 allowed audiences to move and sit as however they needed to in their events and performances. The percentage of performances this is available for is between 5% and 100%. Ten performing arts companies said people were welcome to make noise in their performances and events. The percentage of performances this is available for is between 5% and 90%.

3. There is enough light for audiences or participants to see each other.

“Theatre to me isn’t about all the bells and whistles, it’s about the story. What does it matter if we keep the house lights up a bit?”

Seven survey respondents (3%) strongly agreed and 27 (13%) agreed that *having enough light to see other audience members or participants would make them more likely to attend performances.*

Of the performing arts organizations 13 use this element of relaxed performance for some of their performances. The percentage of performances this is available for is between 5% and 100%.

4. Audience or participants can eat or drink during the performance (relaxed performances usually specify that audience or participants are free to bring their own food and drink, excluding alcohol).

Thirteen respondents (6%) strongly agreed that being able to eat and drink during a performance or event would make them more likely to attend. Sixty-four (32%) agreed with this statement.

Of the performing arts organizations 15 use this element of relaxed performance for some of their performances. The percentage of performances this is available for is between 5% and 100%.

5. Soft seating and/or seating other than chairs is available

Seventeen respondents (8%) strongly agreed that soft seating and seating other than chairs would make them more likely to attend a performance or event.

Thirty-two (16%) agreed with this statement.

Five performing arts organizations use this element of relaxed performance in some of their programming. It was not clear from 3 of the responses what percentage of their programming used this element of relaxed performance but one respondent indicated 70% of their programming used this element and another indicated 100% of their programming used this element.

6. There is a chill-out space available to audience or participants

Chill-out spaces are a room set aside for audience or participants to take a break from the performance or the rest of the building. This can be to manage pain and sensory overload, to have respite from a performance with disturbing material, or so people can take a break from whatever they are doing. Chill-out spaces usually involve soft furnishings (including soft flooring) and low sensory levels, including an absence of fluorescent lights, and an absence of background noise and music. Sometimes they will also include sensory tools like weighted blankets, fidget spinners and pieces of textured cloth.

Eighteen survey respondents (9%) strongly agreed, and 27 (13%) agreed that the presence of a chill out space would make them more likely to attend a performance.

Five performing arts organizations use this element of relaxed performance in some of their programming. The percentage of programming this is associated with ranged from 5% to 70% percent.

7. Changes are made to the lights and sound to avoid overwhelming or paining audience or participants who have sensory sensitivities.

Asking the question, *what kinds of changes in sound, light, and content would make you more likely to attend performances? (for example, louder or quieter sounds, no moments of complete darkness, no sudden changes in the lighting and sound)* generated a tremendous amount of feedback. Almost every survey respondent provided feedback. Only 7 respondents replied that they did not know what changes they would want made to sound and lighting levels, that this would depend on the performance or event, or that no changes were needed. A further 5 respondents focused their feedback on the need for brighter lights in order to see ASL interpreters.

The other respondents to the survey and participants in the focus groups focused on three major areas for changes to lights and sound:

“Quieter sounds, less strobing...”

- A. **Strobes, flashing lights and bright lights.** Many survey respondents and focus group participants found this kind of lighting difficult, irritating, painful or dangerous. They advocated for removing strobes, rapidly changing lights, and lights directed in the audiences' eyes.
- B. **Sudden and loud sounds.** Respondents and participants advocated for softer sound levels overall and removing sudden loud noises.
- C. **Fog and haze.** These effects caused distress for patrons with respiratory impairment. Patrons did not necessarily know that fog or haze would be used in a production until it was used and consequently could not avoid performances with it.

Five performing arts organizations make some changes to lights and sound in their performances for audiences with sensory sensitivities. The percentage of programming this is associated with ranged from 5% to 70%. While beyond the

scope of this research, the overwhelming response to this question, including from respondents who were not interested in other elements of relaxed performances, suggests there may be a mis-match between what lighting and sound designers believe audiences want and audiences' experiences. Further research is called for to better understand audiences' sensory needs and preferences.

Recommendations:

1. **Performing arts organizations should clearly communicate what elements of relaxed performances they are using.** One performing arts organization wrote that audience members were welcome to sit and move however they needed to at 100% of their performances. One of the researchers, however, had attended several of the organization's performances in the last year and was entirely unaware of this. Performing arts organizations could adopt pre-show announcements that clearly outline to audiences that movement and noise, including tics and stims, are welcome (if this is the case), and make this information clear on their website.
2. **Experiment with the elements of relaxed performances.** There were fewer responses to the survey that indicated a need for relaxed performances than captioning, or audio description and touch tours. Relaxed performances, however, remove significant barriers for some people to accessing the performing arts. Performing arts organizations already providing relaxed performances should continue to do so and carefully monitor demand for these types of performances. Performing arts organizations not already providing relaxed performances could experiment with adopting some of the elements of relaxed performances or beginning to provide relaxed performances to gauge the demand.

Pre-show Information

As noted above, pre-show information can be an important part of a relaxed performance. Pre-show information is information that is provided before a patron

arrives at an event or performance, either at the point-of-sale, or before arrival. It can also be an important accessibility method on its own. The following section lays out the responses from the surveys, focus groups and interviews to various types of pre-show information.

1. **Detailed descriptions of the performance or event, including possibly upsetting parts of the performance or event, like violence on-stage or off (sometimes these are called trigger warnings or content notes).**

Descriptions of what will happen in the performance or event can serve a number of different purposes. The practice of trigger warning initially came from online communities that were attempting to prevent intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and overwhelming fear often associated with experiencing traumatic events. The definition has expanded and including trigger warnings or content notes can allow audience members or participants to prepare themselves to attend performances or events that deal with potentially upsetting material. Comprehensive descriptions of what will happen in the performance can serve as a tool to reduce anxiety for participants or audience members who find the uncertainty of performing arts events difficult, or to help them understand and engage more deeply with the performance or event.

Nineteen (9.41%) survey respondents strongly agreed and 63 (30.69%) agreed that they would be more likely to attend if they had a detailed description of the performance or event.

Fifteen performing arts companies provided detailed descriptions of their performances or events.

2. **Detailed descriptions of the sensory environment of the performance or event.**

The practice of providing sensory information about the performance is becoming increasingly common. Examples of this include Dr. Will Renel's

Sound Stories, an annotated visual representation of the sonic environment of a performance or simple written descriptions of the sensory environment of the performance. The survey asked participants about their likelihood to go to an event or performance if they have a detailed description of the lights and sound, particularly when things are very loud or very bright. Fifteen (7.43%) respondents strongly agreed and 41 (20.30%) agreed that having a detailed description of the lights and sound would make them more likely to attend a performance or event.

Fifteen performing arts organizations provide this information. One organization did not provide a percentage of their programming, but the rest indicated that they provide this information for between 75% and 100% percent of their programming with 5 organizations providing this information for 100% of their programming. Responses to the survey and focus groups, however, suggest that the information being provided by companies is insufficient or not being provided early enough for audience members or participants to determine if they can safely and comfortably attend a performance. A survey respondent wrote:

“As a person with epilepsy it is important to know before going to a performance whether it is safe for me to attend (i.e. no strobes, or obvious triggers) Event hosts should make it clear, and because so many do not it is often that unless somebody else I know has gone to a show first, I will simply not go. It would be nice if you could be clear if you don't have those things. Example: Putting on the poster 'strobe free event' or something of that sort, so I know I will be safe attending”

3. Length of the performance or event

Focus groups participants noted that the timing of events and performances was important to them, particularly knowing when an event or performance would

end. Sometimes this was because they had to provide a pick-up time to DATS (Edmonton's accessible transit service). Sometimes this was because they were reluctant to travel a long time on public transport late at night. They also highlighted that they would like more events and performances to take place in the afternoon, likely to give them more flexibility and comfort getting to and from performances and events.

Seventeen performing arts organizations provided the length of their performances or events. The organizations that provide this information provide it for between 70% and 100% of their programming, with 10 organizations providing it for 100% of their programming.

4. **Visual Stories**

Visual stories, or visual guides, are modelled after Social Stories, a tool developed by Carol Gray to explain social situations to autistic people¹⁰. Visual stories use Easy English, a style of writing that pair pictures or visuals with very plain language text. Visual stories generally explain how to get to an event, when the event is, where the event is located, how long it is, where the toilets are, what happens in the event and how someone could react and respond to the event. While intended for use by neurodivergent audience members they are also used by mobility tool users to better understand the physical accessibility of the space, and by visually impaired audience members to get a better understanding of the set, costumes and appearance of the performers.

Thirteen (6.44%) survey respondents strongly agreed that a visual story would make them more likely to attend a performance or event and 34 (16.83%) agreed with this statement. Six (2.97%) survey respondents strongly agreed and another 28 (13.86%) agreed that having access to photographs of the space and performers in costume before the performance or even would make them more likely to go.

¹⁰ Gray, Carol (2020). Overview. Carol Gray Social Stories. Retrieved from: <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories>

In an interview, John Helix described the difficulties of going to new places and doing new things. He said:

“There are just too many extremely large steps between “wanting to do a thing” and “actually doing a thing” for someone like me. Too much uncertainty. What if it’s in an unfamiliar place? What if I can’t remember the address properly? Do I need to show up early? How early is too early? Once I’ve located the place, where do I go? Which door? Do I need a ticket? Who do I need to show my ticket? What do I do after I show my ticket? Will I be sitting? Standing? How close should I stand? What if I need to use the washroom? Where is it? Will I lose my place? The questions never stop, and they can get very, very loud”

When the interviewer followed up, asking about visual stories, familiarization tours (sometimes a part of relaxed performances where audience members are introduced to the building, the theatre and the performers) and way-finding videos, he was enthusiastic about these tools. For him, providing explicit information about how to get to an event, when to get there, and what he could and couldn’t do at the event would remove significant barriers to him engaging in the performing arts. Ideally, this would be in the form of a visual story, which makes this information accessible to more people. In addition to the difficulties John Helix described, focus group participants also spoke about how difficult it was to find important logistical information, such as where they could wait for DATS, or if the washrooms were accessible at a venue.

Only 1 performing arts organizations provided visual stories and indicated that they provided them for 100% of their performances. However, when a researcher visited the organization’s website, they could not find a visual story for the organization’s current performance. This may indicate an error filling out

the survey, or confusion about what visual stories are, and what they are intended to do.

Recommendations:

1. **All organizations should be providing basic content notes and information about the sensory environment of the performance or event.** If organizations are already providing brief content notes they could experiment with providing enhanced sensory information or a plain language synopsis of the event or performance to enhance access.
2. **Performing arts organizations should make it clear at point of sale if strobe lights, bright flashing lights, loud volumes, haze, or fog will be used in the performance or event.** Strobe lights, flashing lights and loud noises were particularly noted as being sensory adjustments that respondents would like. Some survey respondents elaborated, noting that these sensory elements could have serious consequences for them in the form of migraines, epilepsy or difficulties breathing. Providing clear information about the sensory environment of the performance or event at the point of sale would at least allow potential audience members to identify what they can and cannot safely attend, and avoid wasting money on unsafe performances and events. This will require significant effort on the part of performing arts organizations to coordinate with sound and lighting designers to make these decisions before tickets go on sale. This is particularly important for organizations who use dynamic pricing. If performing arts organizations offer a discount to audience members who buy tickets early, but do not provide adequate pre-show information, they are effectively financially penalizing disabled audiences.
3. **All organizations should be providing the length of the performance or event.** Not providing the length of the performance or event creates major barriers to people who need to book DATS, who need to arrive home by a particular time in order to access care, or who simply prefer not to be out late at night.

4. **Organizations should seek to provide clear, accessible information about the venue and the social expectations of the event.** Venues could invest in visual stories and plain language information about the basics of how to get to the venue, where the DATS drop off and pick up is, where the bathrooms in venue are, and the basic social rules of the venue. These resources could be created once, and while they will not replace having a visual story for every performance or event, they would remove some of the barriers neurodivergent people encounter attending performances or events.

Equity of Experience

While the survey, focus group and interview guide did not explicitly ask about this, the theme of equity of experience emerged very strongly, particularly in relation to financial, physical and linguistic access. Responses to the survey and focus groups revealed that going to performing arts events was an often laborious and difficult process because patron relations assumed able and hearing audience members. This meant that Deaf and disabled audiences often could access the performing arts, but had to do more work and had less pleasant experiences than able and hearing audience members. While the survey and focus group guide did not explicitly ask about this theme, it summarizes a wide range of experiences and feelings that survey respondents, focus group participants and interviewees expressed.

Participants told many stories of difficult experiences. For example, one participant had an usher take their walker from them when they were seated in a theatre without telling them where the walker was taken, or when it would be returned. One interviewee spoke of having to educate arts organizations that she was allowed to have her service dog with her - something guaranteed by the Alberta Service Dog Act and carrying a fine of \$3000 for violating the legislation¹¹. The focus group participant who relied on hearing loops was never compensated by organizations when they attended performances and discovered the hearing loop was not working. These stories revealed an uneven level of disability awareness and knowledge of disability etiquette,

¹¹ Government of Alberta. Service Dogs in Public. Retrieved from: <https://www.alberta.ca/service-dogs-in-public.aspx>

particularly among front of house staff and volunteers. Having to call the box office to book access seats, instead of booking online, was also a hassle that focus group participants were particularly frustrated with because they knew non-disabled audiences did not have to do this. Deaf focus group participants spoke about how front of house staff and bar staff who knew ASL greatly improved the quality of their experiences because they did not have to struggle to communicate. Participants felt performing arts organizations created unequal customer service experiences because organizations lacked Deaf, disability, and access awareness.

Participants and interviewees had many suggestions to improve patron relations for Deaf and disabled people including seeking out awareness and etiquette training to create a baseline Deaf and disability awareness among staff, volunteers, artists and board members, but particularly front-line staff. A focus group attendee also suggested that all performing arts organizations should provide a comment box for patrons to write in access needs when purchasing tickets online. This would allow patrons to articulate their access needs however they felt comfortable and prevent confusion when they attended. Focus groups participants also suggested hiring Deaf and disabled consultants to improve the accessibility of organizations, and generally, hiring Deaf and disabled artists and staff. Deaf and disabled people do not have consensus on barriers, access practices, and etiquette so it is important to seek out a variety of resources and opinions, including a strong mix of professional and lived experience. Bringing in specialized performing arts access training to Edmonton to improve organizations understanding of performing arts accessibility was also suggested. Participants and interviewees noted that organizations could cost share on these initiatives, further improving communication and knowledge sharing between performing arts organizations.

Recommendations:

1. **Performing arts organizations should invest in Deaf and disability awareness training for staff, volunteers, artists, board members with particular emphasis on front-line staff.** Box office staff, ushers, volunteers and bar staff are the first point, and often the only, point of contact for Deaf, disabled and other audience members. Ensuring that service is provided confidently, and in

a Deaf and disability aware manner, will reduce the need for Deaf and disabled audience members to educate and advocate for themselves instead of enjoying themselves. This training should emphasize the social model of disability and barrier removal. Ideally this would include basic knowledge of ASL for front-line staff.

2. **Performing arts organizations should increase their knowledge of access, and Deaf and disability cultures, and where possible, cost and knowledge share with each other.** Increasing knowledge could involve hiring consultants, Deaf and disabled staff, bringing specialized performing arts access training to Edmonton, and informal knowledge sharing between organizations.
3. **All tickets, including access tickets, should be available to book online.** Requiring audience members to call or email the box office requires work of disabled patrons that other audience members do not have to do. This creates a major barrier to potential audience members engaging with the performing arts.

“I put ‘neither agree nor disagree’ for a lot of the above answers, but I should stress that even though they don’t often affect my personal experience with a show/piece of art, I am happy when they are options. I want my fellow audience members to have whatever they need to enjoy a performance as well!”

Priority Recommendations

This section is about the changes we think are the most important and most urgent.

It is clear that there are many barriers to engagement with the performing arts in Edmonton. It is also clear that there is a desire among the performing arts organizations to remove those barriers. While we have made recommendations throughout the report we recommend prioritizing the following changes to practice in the Edmonton performing arts community.

1. **Clear communication about accessibility and inaccessibility.**

Edmonton performing arts organizations are trying to make their work more accessible, particularly financially accessible. Clearly communicating to potential audience members and participants what Edmonton performing arts organizations are already doing is an important first step. Many performing arts organizations expressed that a lack of knowledge kept them from making their performances and events accessible to more people. Responses from the performing arts organizations revealed a varying level of familiarity with performing arts accessibility practices like audio description and visual stories. Performing arts organizations should seek opportunities to educate themselves, and to knowledge share with each other about accessibility practices so they can clearly communicate what they are and are not doing.

Given the extent to which audience members and potential audience members find information online, the availability and clarity of access information online is vital. One interviewee noted that some venues mark themselves as inaccessible but she knew they were accessible to her. Making full, comprehensive access information for venues, performances and events available online is vital to attracting disabled patrons. The importance of this is underscored by research done by Euan's Guide, a UK based organization that crowd-sources reviews of the accessibility of businesses. Each year Euan's Guide surveys disabled people to find out about accessibility. In 2018 they found that 94% of disabled people try to find access information online before visiting

somewhere and 88% of disabled people were more likely to visit somewhere new if there was access information provided¹². If access information is not provided 53% of respondents assumed the venue was inaccessible and didn't go. Vocal Eye's yearly State of Theatre Access Report provides guidance on the kinds of basic accessibility information that organizations should make available online.

Responses to the survey and the focus groups indicate that performing arts organizations should be providing the name(s) of the ASL interpreter or interpreting team, comprehensive descriptions (including potentially upsetting elements of the event or performance), and information about the sensory environment of performances or events (particularly the use of strobes, sudden loud noises, fog and haze). Ideally this information should appear at point of sale, to allow audience members to make informed decisions about what they spend their money on.

2. Improve customer service for Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing and disabled patrons.

Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing and disabled people consistently described having to do significant work to access the performing arts. This might involve having to call or email box offices for accessible tickets, educate front-line staff on access, or deal with potentially difficult situations. To reduce this labour and prevent difficult situations performing arts organizations should increase their knowledge of access, and Deaf and disability cultures. Increasing knowledge could involve hiring consultants, Deaf and disabled staff and bringing specialized performing arts access training to Edmonton. In addition, all tickets, including access tickets, should be available to book online.

3. Edmonton arts should have a central online space advertising accessible performances: relaxed, ASL interpreted, captioned and audio described.

Edmonton arts organizations should not be relying exclusively on other not-for-profit organizations to do outreach for performing arts events. Asking Deaf and disabled audience members, however, to do the work to seek out all the performing arts

¹² Euan's Guide (2018) The Access Survey 2018. Euan's Guide. Retrieved from: <https://www.euansguide.com/access-survey>

organizations in Edmonton and their accessible performances would be overwhelming. Edmonton needs an online space where audiences can quickly and easily find listings of accessible performances.

An option would be to use the already existing resource of the Creative Users Project, which advertises accessible performances across Canada on their website and through a newsletter. It is already used by some organizations here in Edmonton, such as Fringe Theatre. Organizations could advertise with the Creative Users Project and use their own websites and newsletters to encourage Deaf and disabled patrons to utilize this resource. Another option would be to use the existing resources of Theatre Alberta's Playbill to list accessible performances. This would require some changes to Theatre Alberta's website capacities to allow patrons to filter for the type of accessibility they are interested in. In addition, because the majority of audience survey respondents were interested in many different types of performing arts, ideally Theatre Alberta's Playbill would list performances other than theatre.

4. Increase the number of captioned performances and events in Edmonton.

There is a strong interest in captioned performances in Edmonton and performing arts companies should expand the number of captioned performances they offer.

5. Advocate for increased support from funders for audience access.

Improving the accessibility of Edmonton's performing arts will take significant time and expense. Having dedicated support from funders to support both one-time initial investment costs, and the ongoing costs of skilled accessibility services such as interpretation, audio description, and live captioning would allow Edmonton's performing arts organizations to expand their access offers. This might also provide more consistency to the access provided by Edmonton's performing arts organizations, which would likely support attracting and retaining new audience members.

Resources

This section gives links to resources, including funding, that may be helpful to performing arts organizations seeking to improve their accessibility.

Accessibility Audits:

RAMP Audit - Please note that this is an activist, and community compiled resource.

Please carefully read the author's requests before using it.

<https://radicalaccessiblecommunities.wordpress.com/the-radical-access-mapping-project/>

Voices of Albertans with Disabilities:

<https://vadsociety.ca/>

Audio Description:

Accessible Media Inc (AMI):

<https://www.ami.ca/home>

Extant's Enhance Program:

<https://extant.org.uk/access/enhance/>

Inside Out Theatre Good Host Program:

<https://www.insideouttheatre.com/good-host>

Kat Germain (based in Toronto) provides audio description and audio describer training:

<http://www.katgermain.com/>

Vocal Eye (based in Vancouver) provides audio description and audio describer training:

<http://www.vocaleyeye.ca/>

Captioning:

Difference Engine:

https://402ec9bb-c851-4d7a-b467-6f903c3571fa.filesusr.com/ugd/574bc3_db529a5a86414da385cf6c019fd82b82.pdf

Galapro:

<https://www.galapro.com/services>

National Theatre's Captioning Glasses:

<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/your-visit/access/caption-glasses>

Easy English:

Scope (an Australian organization) provides information on Easy English and plain language:

<https://www.scopeaust.org.au/services-for-organisations/access-and-inclusion-for-businesses/accessible-information/>

General Disability Awareness:

Voices of Albertans with Disabilities:

<https://vadsociety.ca/>

Online Access Information:

Creative Users Projects provides listings of accessible events and performances across Canada:

<http://creativeusers.net/>

Theatre Alberta's Playbill:

<https://www.theatrealberta.com/playbill/>

Vocal Eye's yearly State of Theatre Access Report:

The report, released yearly provides an important tool for tracking the accessibility of British theatre, and important information on the kinds of access information venues and performing arts organizations should make available online.

<https://vocaleyec.co.uk/state-of-theatre-access-2019/>

Web Accessibility in Mind:

WebAim is a well respected source of information on online accessibility.

<https://webaim.org/>

Physical Accessibility Resources:

Please note that the following documents link to guides and legislation for Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. Often these standards are considered inadequate by disabled people.

Americans with Disabilities Act Standards for Accessible Design:

https://www.ada.gov/2010ADAstandards_index.htm

Document M (UK Access Guidelines):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-and-use-of-buildings-approved-document-m>

Guide to Barrier Free Design:

http://www.safetycodes.ab.ca/Public/Documents/Barrier-Free-Design-Guide_WEB-Aug2019.pdf

Ontarian's with Disabilities Act:

<https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/05a11>

Plain (Accessible) Language:

<https://www.boia.org/blog/ditch-the-fancy-vocabulary-for-accessible-language>

Relaxed Performances:

British Council Canada:

The British Council Canada provides training on Relaxed Performances base on the SOLT model. (Edmonton-based Chris Dodd and Connor Yuzwenko-Martin completed Access Activator training with the British Council in 2020)

<https://www.britishcouncil.ca/programmes/arts/challenging-boundaries/relaxed-performance>

Inside Out Theatre Good Host Program:

<https://www.insideouttheatre.com/good-host>

Touretteshero:

Touretteshero has developed a model of relaxed performances that focuses on changes to audience behaviour and providing comprehensive pre-show information:

<https://www.touretteshero.com/2016/03/16/relaxed-performances-the-faqs/>

<https://www.touretteshero.com/2019/07/09/stop-talking-and-start-relaxing-2019/>

Visual Stories:

Example of a visual story from the Unicorn Theatre:

<https://www.unicorntheatre.com/files/1-Huddle%20Visual%20Story.pdf>

Example of a visual story from Access All Areas:

<https://www.parktheatre.co.uk/media/files/Access/Peter%20Pan%20-%20Park%20Theatre%20-%20-%20-%20Visual%20Guide.pdf>

Sonic Story:

https://graeae.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/One-Under-Sonic-Story-_-Low-Res.jpg

Unlimited Resources Section:

Unlimited is a commissioning program for disabled artists in the UK. They have published many resources to making the arts more accessible.

<https://weareunlimited.org.uk/resources/>

Resources for Funding Renovations to Improve Accessibility:

Canada Cultural Spaces Fund:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/funding/cultural-spaces-fund.html>

Canada Heritage's Cultural Spaces Fund:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/funding/cultural-spaces-fund.html>

CIP Community Facility Enhancement Fund:

<https://www.alberta.ca/community-facility-enhancement-program.aspx>

Co-op Community Spaces:

<https://www.co-op.crs/communityspaces/funding>

Enabling Accessibility Fund:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/enabling-accessibility-fund.html>

Funders with a Focus on Access and Disability in Edmonton:

Allard Foundation:

<https://allardfoundation.com/>

Butler Family Foundation:

<https://www.butlerfamilyfoundation.ca/>

Stollery Foundation:

<http://www.stollerycharitablefoundation.org/>

Acknowledgements

This section lists the people and institutions that helped with this report

The Edmonton Performing Arts Accessibility Report was generously funded by the Edmonton Community Foundation, the Edmonton Arts Council and the City of Edmonton. The organizations involved would like to thank Martin Garber-Conrad and Stephen Williams for their ongoing guidance and support through this phase of community consultation.

Additionally, we would like to thank:

Citadel Theatre, especially Jessie van Rijn

Concrete Theatre

Fringe Theatre

Gateway Association

L'Unithéâtre

Nina Haggerty Centre for the Arts

Pride Centre of Edmonton

Everyone who gave their time by attending a focus group, doing an interview, or filling out the survey

Researcher Biographies

This section is about the people who did the research and wrote this report.

Brooke Leifso has many years experience in professional theatre and community art practices. She is currently working on her Masters of Arts in Expressive Arts Therapy - Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding, exploring how the process of art-making can aid in the process of social cohesion and change. She is a skilled facilitator in popular education and social justice models and directly applies them to her artistic practice. She has worked on multiple projects with forms of marginalization, facilitating participants to tell their own personal stories on love, sex, disability, coming out as queer, and gender based violence. She also has extensive theatre administration experience and lived experience of disability with the diagnosis of Cerebral Palsy. She is currently the vice-president of the board of Mile Zero Dance and holds the Festival Box Office Management position with the Edmonton International Fringe Festival where she advocates for accessibility.

Connor Yuzwenko-Martin is descended from settlers, and recognizes and strives every day to honour and act upon the fact that his work and accomplishments take place on Treaty 6 territory, primarily in the region of Amiskwaciy'waskahan, known as the settler city of Edmonton. He benefits from the land, water, and air shared by countless generations that have come before us and will come after us, and aims to live in harmony with this cycle. Connor has nurtured a lifelong passion for theatre and accessibility, beginning in grade school with simple skits and continuing into his young adulthood with his first professional engagement as a rookie improviser at Rapidfire Theatre. More recent work includes serving as the Deaf Consultant for Concrete Theatre's production *Songs My Mother Never Sung Me* (2019), and various roles in Canada's only Deaf arts festival *Sound Off* (2017-19). Currently he is developing an interactive art installation for NextFest 2020. Connor supports several local Edmonton theatres and organizations in improving their engagement with the Deaf community through consultations and creating informational subtitled vlogs in ASL with transcripts and visual description. In the coming months and years, Connor aims to transition into a full time communications role within the theatre community. His primary goal is to act as a liaison between multiple theatres and groups in order to bring a greater and more reliable consistency to the various inclusion efforts being put forth through coordination of events, communications management, and other facilitation roles - as well as pursuing his own art, of course. He completed a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science at the University of Alberta (2014), and is currently completing a Public Relations diploma at MacEwan University.

My name is **Heath Birkholz**. I identify as a human with an acquired disability. My disability came from a pedestrian to vehicle collision when I was crossing an urban street when I was 7. As my identity has developed from living with unique ways of navigating and negotiating with the world. From these experiences, I have gained a skill set in community building and development from my lived experience in arts, self advocacy and social justice. My skill set in community building and development come

from my lived experience in arts, self advocacy and social justice I also developed tools for my skill set from my BA in Communication & Culture from the U of C as well as Certified training in Facilitating Peace Circles. Accessibility is the core to my work in cultivating sustainable communities with healthy relationships of diverse communities and genders, human rights and love.

Kelsie Acton was born and raised in amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton) in Treaty 6 territory. She is a neurodivergent PhD candidate in the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport and Recreation at the University of Alberta, studying the accessibility of timing in integrated dance. Over the course of her education she has completed course work in qualitative research methods and has published on participatory arts-based research. Currently, she is the Inclusive Practice Manager at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) in London, England. BAC is the world's first Relaxed Venue and she is responsible for accessibility, and the implementation of the relaxed venue methodology throughout the organization, giving her a broad and international perspective on accessibility in the performing arts.

Simone A. Medina Polo is an interdisciplinary scholar and artist based out of Edmonton, Alberta. Graduated from Concordia University of Edmonton with a B.A. in Philosophy and English, Simone has continued her own independent research on psychoanalysis and philosophy, which landed her as a presenter for Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology (Warsaw) and the 6th Annual Derrida Today Conference (Montreal). Her research is informed by sex, race, and class in re-framing the psychoanalytic subject around transgender and racialized experiences, while aiming at broader non-philosophical dislocations of philosophically given concepts and methods in order to both remodel philosophy itself and pursue non-philosophical concerns. In pursuing an Arts and Cultural Management diploma at MacEwan University as well as working closely with different organizations and institutions, Simone is looking translate these insights into diverse cultural and artistic enterprises and activities.