

# GENERATOR AND THE RISER PROJECT: SECTOR DEVELOPERS FOR INDEPENDENT THEATRE IN TORONTO

A research and discussion paper commissioned  
by Toronto Arts Foundation with the support of  
The Metcalf Foundation and Toronto Arts Council

October 2017

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Culture of Cities Centre





WATER  
WINE  
MIXED DRINKS  
BUTTER COFFEE  
SUN PEI  
JUICE  
TALCAN  
AMERICAN  
LATTE  
ESPRESSO  
CORTADO  
MEXICO  
COFFEE  
TEA  
CAPPUCCINO  
HOT CHOCOLATE  
MUFFIN  
VANILLA LATTE  
SANDWICH  
SALAD  
FRUITATA (DAILY)

YES!  
BRING YOUR DRINKS  
INTO THE THEATRE

WE ACCEPT  
VISA  
MASTERCARD  
CASH  
NO SQUARE FOR US ONLY

WIFI: THEATRECENTREQUEST  
PASS: wifi4free

Toronto Arts Foundation conducts research studies to build a better understanding of the impact of the arts on all aspects of life in Toronto. We work in partnership with Toronto Arts Council, other foundations, agencies, academic institutions, and community groups. Our research examines barriers to arts access, trends in arts engagement, and significant changes and needs in the arts and culture field.

In 2015, with support from the Metcalf Foundation and Toronto Arts Council, we embarked on a study of two ventures that are making a difference in Toronto’s performing arts sector.

This report, like all our research, informs the most effective policy and funding opportunities for Toronto Arts Foundation and Toronto Arts Council. We are committed to sharing arts research with stakeholders including cultural and community development organizations, cultural policy makers, and educators — locally, nationally, and internationally.

***Generator and The RISER Project: Sector developers for independent theatre in Toronto*** comes out of conversations about systems change, and ways to encourage Toronto’s arts and culture sector to dream big, collaborate and address what needs to change.

Helen Yung’s study shines a spotlight on two bold new initiatives. It is a thoughtful and nuanced exploration of the current pressures and opportunities facing the inhabitants of Toronto’s “independent theatreland.” We hope this research will be a catalyst for further discussion, studies and acts of boldness.

For more information on this project or other Toronto Arts Foundation research, please contact:

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper looks at two bold new change initiatives that have emerged from the independent theatre sector in Toronto. While this research is intended first for the communities involved, efforts have been made to render the discussion legible for outsiders. There is content and even methods here for anyone interested in an arts-minded perspective on systems change, approaches to sector development or field building, innovation, and/or evaluation, as well as the conscious coupling of artistic and non-artistic sense-making processes.

The purpose of this research is to identify learning and insights through the case studies of Generator and Why Not Theatre's The RISER Project. Generator and The RISER Project are next-wave sector developers for the independent performing arts. Both are building *up* people and resources, and building *out* communities, networks and infrastructure. Both ventures share work space and access to other people's work spaces, creating networks of physical infrastructure as an essential component of sector building. They have each identified a different dimension of the independent theatremaker's experience to support and champion: Generator's motivation could be described as wanting to help independent theatremakers make art with less (administrative) pain or tedium, and more resources and efficiency. The RISER Project's motivation could be described as wanting to see

more independent theatremakers have opportunities to present their work on professional stages in a sustainable way.

Framed as an exploratory process, the research method was guided by two sets of questions concerning (1) the values underlying the actions or activities that the community believes is needed to change the sector, and (2) the challenge of understanding and assessing new, innovative, disruptive gestures. Put another way, these questions are about trying to understand, through the two case studies, how the independent theatre sector is developing, what is emergent, while self-consciously reflecting on that strange process of understanding, of trying to 'pin down' or 'apprehend' solutions, processes and actions that are fluid and still evolving. How does one make legible that which is constantly being revised, rewritten or renovated? By definition, emergent phenomena are not entirely knowable. The complexity of emergence lies not in "the many" (many factors, many perspectives, a lot of data) but in the mingling tension between the knowable and the unknowable.

To respond to these guiding questions, the report begins with an overview of each of the two ventures, largely based on 29 interviews with staff, participants and related stakeholders. These overviews are not exercises in program evaluation. They serve as examples of contemporary sector development efforts, *to inform the larger discussion*: What is



needed for sector change today, and how does one assess innovative actions, and compare them? From the overviews, some strategies common to both ventures are identified. These strategies include acceleration, immersion, coaching, co-residencies, culture and collectivity. The two ventures represent a hustle-oriented community, a devising community, a community that says “people first,” led by a start-up attitude (“throwing things at the wall to see what sticks”) toward *anything* and maybe everything — art, organization, collaboration, entrepreneurialism and “being evaluated.”

Next, some questions surface. From a business perspective, where are the customers and are there enough of them tuned into this market? In the future, to what extent might The RISER Project focus on tours and remounts for participating artists as key performance indicators? To what extent might Generator produce efficiencies in their training and residency programs by constructing a contemporary typology of career paths for individuals and stages of development for independent companies? For arts funders, how does the arts sector respond to the suggestion that innovation requires failure? Without measurable (or without measuring) failure, how do we know that the risk and innovation implied are real, right or bold enough? In a society increasingly dominated by economics, algorithms and Big Data mindsets, *what does art know? And how can this matter?*

The suggestion of this report is hope. Beyond the mechanics or model of each venture (which are very different), and beyond their common strategies of acceleration, immersion, coaching, co-residencies, culture and collectivity, both Generator and The RISER Project offer independent theatremakers hope. To measure progress and ambition, to set measurable goals *and* offer the people doing the work more freedom, this paper proposes hope.

Far from flimsy or unreliable, it is reasonable to believe that a rubric on hope can be a responsible metric. Hope is a resonant, multifaceted emotion and concept that relates to many other factors for success or progress. Hope is discernible. This report suggests that ‘return on hope’ might form the basis of a rubric for assessing the value of actions and ventures aimed at shifting systems or transforming stagnant realities. If return on investment (ROI) measures the economic value of a venture, might return on hope (ROH) measure its human, social, creative or transformative value? Indexed over time, does hope in Toronto theatre trend up or down?

Acknowledging that deep-seated frustrations exist in this sector, what might change, and how, if more efforts were encouraged with an eye to measurably increasing hope over time?





## PURPOSE

This research has been commissioned by Toronto Arts Foundation with the support of the Metcalf Foundation and Toronto Arts Council. The Foundation requested a research paper that would look at Generator and The RISER Project, two “innovative collaborative ventures” emerging from the independent theatre community. Initially, the 18-month study was framed to include a substantial mix of deliverables, including program evaluation and recommendations for the case studies, documentation of lessons learned and outcomes, as well as to “support innovation, capture knowledge and share best practices.”

Following the departure of the first researcher who was unable to stay to complete the project, there was a recalibration of research goals to better reflect the new process as stage two of the research study. A revised scope of work was proposed along with two sets of guiding research questions concerned with:

1. A critical look at the values and beliefs underlying the change or transformation that people desire or believe is needed in the theatre sector; and

2. The challenges of evaluating new, innovative, disruptive gestures and what an arts-informed approach might contribute to understanding systems change.

The first frame considers values as a way of looking past the mechanics of the cases, to look at how the two ventures relate. The second frame generalizes a level up from these case studies to consider how something can be ‘allowed’ to change, to be unstable, not fixed, while recognizing the need or usefulness of some way to measure and assign a sense of value or progress. This preliminary framework and language was open to modification through the interviewing and literature review process, to make use of ‘bottom-up’ language (used by interviewees to express interests or concerns) and concepts already in circulation or being theorized in the literature.

Ultimately, the overarching question that remains unchanged throughout the research process is: *What insights and learning can be derived from looking at these two bold new ventures?*





## BACKGROUND

Statistics Canada defines “independent” artists as freelance individuals. This would mean that virtually everyone in the theatre sector is an independent. As the administrator at a local postsecondary theatre program put it, “there is no fulltime in this business.” Most people who work in theatre do it on a freelance basis. Even actors working at the largest theatre companies in the country are only contracted for the duration of a season.<sup>1</sup>

A working definition with broad, fuzzy edges might simply be that “independent theatremakers” refers to artists, producers, technicians, administrators and other people involved in the making of theatre, who are not students and who do not consider themselves living an established life with steady, predictable stream(s) of income. There is a high degree of insecurity and uncertainty. Expectations of work and income generally fluctuate weekly, monthly, seasonally, all the time.

As one of the three largest urban centres in Canada, Toronto has been described in recent years as a “mini New York City.” From theatre and other

arts to dining to nightlife, the arts and entertainment scene in Toronto is large, varied, competitive and deeply shaped by steep real estate and rental markets. Vancouver’s scene is not as populous, while Montreal’s scene is distinguished by significantly cheaper prices for work and living spaces. Many theatre graduates move to Toronto for “more opportunities” and/or the perception that “making it” in Toronto means more than making it anywhere else in Canada.

So, on top of the widespread, international concern about dwindling audiences for theatre, independent theatremakers in Toronto are challenged by a perceived oversupply of makers, high cost of living, growing disparity in the city between the rich and the poor, lack of affordable venues, various geographical and accessibility concerns associated with a sprawling metropolis serviced by a less than stellar public transit system, and a public that has plenty of other enticing things to do in Toronto every single night.

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast, there are European theatre companies that engage actors year-round on an indeterminate (permanent) basis.

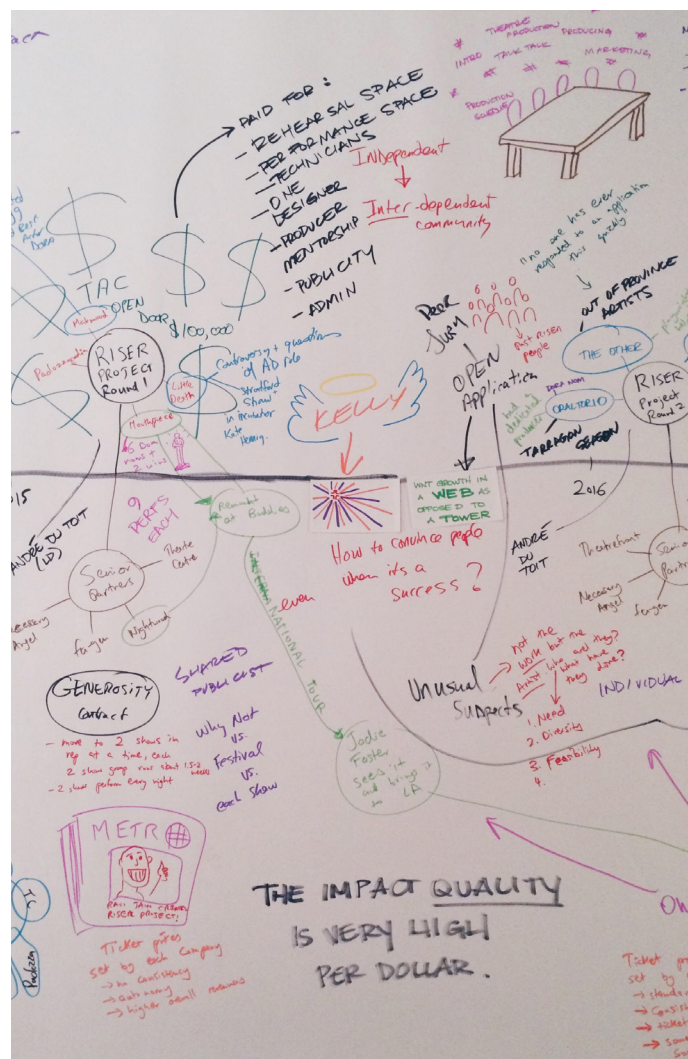
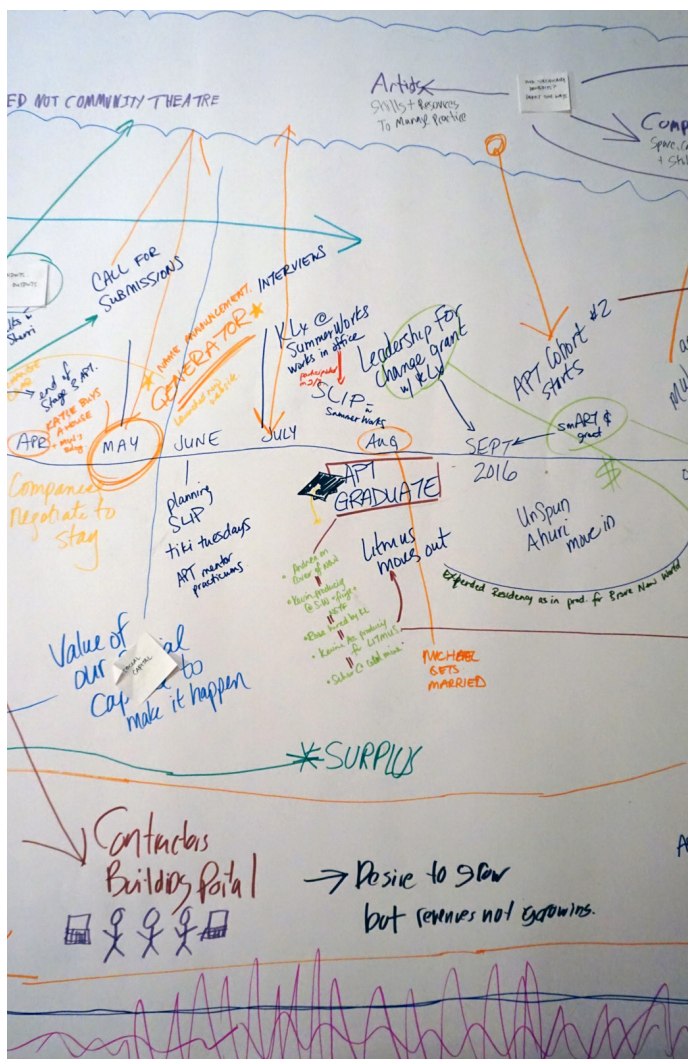


## METHOD

Appendix II (“Detailed method and timeline”) provides a detailed overview of the methods used for framing the inquiry, collecting, coding and analyzing data, and completing this report. Key components of the method included:

- 29 interviews total, ranging from 30 minutes to 3 hours each. Specifically, 6 individual staff interviews, 11 interviews with Generator participants and guest instructors from the past two years, 13 interviews with participants and senior partners of The RISER Project over the last three years.
- 2 giga mapping exercises — high resolution, information-dense, multi-layered visualizations by and for each venture.

Literature reviewed consisted of scholarly articles, articles published in the mainstream media, and reports published by industry knowledge centres (e.g. Centre for Digital Entrepreneurship and Economic Performance). Appendix I (“Selected bibliography”) contains a list of some sources consulted. Keywords included: *social innovation, systems change, cultural start-ups, Canadian or successful accelerators and incubators, arts entrepreneurship, employment for arts graduates, independent theatre producing in Toronto and Canada.*





## LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this report has not been to produce a comprehensive program evaluation of Generator and The RISER Project. The research was conducted in the months following the majority of the program activities, and as such did not include participant observation in its methods. Interviewees sometimes could not recall specific details or examples, positive or negative, given the time that had passed.

## METHODOLOGY

In terms of approach, the methodology behind the research design is qualitative-interpretive, systems thinking-informed, appreciative inquiry-derived, and partly arts-led (specifically, inter-arts-informed). Appendix III (“More on methodology”) offers an explanation of those terms.

In essence, the research approach is discovery-oriented, looking at the bigger picture through the case studies, and aims to construct a way forward based on what people inside the system or situation say is working.

Bringing the arts mindset into the foreground of research is about trying to model the way the arts sector might wish for humanity to see and understand itself — through a complex, inclusive, appreciative and arts-informed lens.





## THIS IS INDEPENDENT THEATRELAND

Imagine a map. Along the left edge of this map are universities, colleges, private studios and other places of learning. People go to these places to learn the theory and practice of theatremaking — acting, directing, writing, dramaturgy, stage management, lighting, sound, set and costume design, etc. Some people also learn through apprenticeship; their education and training happens in a theatre, on the job. The spaces for these learning activities are typically well-defined, visible if you are looking. The path to getting into the universities and colleges is easy to see even if getting there may be more challenging.

Along the right edge of the map are the theatre venues and companies with dependable annual operating budgets that allow them to make and present shows on a regular basis. How to get into these places, even as an audience member, is sometimes not obvious. But they are visible enough in the landscape. Once you are inside the structures, there is shelter, there are seats, you will find other people, there may even be coffee, conversation and ice cream bars. Life is good.

In the middle of this map, between the places for learning and the places for making, is an ambiguous terrain, a kind of non-place. This terrain is not well-developed. There is still significant disorder; subsistence depends on temporary structures and social affiliation. Temporary events such as festivals and awards ceremonies come and go, marking time passing and creating some shared sense of structure, order, and continuity. A couple of generations ago, people thought of this area as an in-between space that one crosses on their way from learning the theatre crafts to getting to work in a building, or making one's own. This paper proposes to name this in-between space, *independent theatreland*.

Generator and The RISER Project are *sector developers* of independent theatreland: They have looked out at the ambiguous, underdeveloped in-between space and noticed that it is teeming with talent. The population of independent theatreland is growing. There are more learners arriving, often from other cities, provinces, sometimes even other countries, and not much movement of people from the disorderly terrain into buildings. The occasional

new building that goes up tends to be a modest size, and gets filled up pretty quickly.

Generator and The RISER Project have taken it upon themselves to work on the development of this sector, alongside others who have already been working for years to support the population. They have looked into the chaos, and identified their own ways to help independent theatreland dwellers make a better, more fulfilling and sustainable life.

Generator helps build the capacities of individuals and small project-based companies to put on shows and other sorts of things they like to do in independent theatreland. Generator is professionalizing the practice of being independent — the scrappy or flexible kind, for when one is not necessarily aiming for operating funding or looking to acquire a performance venue. Generator trains individuals, coaches companies, offers shelter (office and meeting space) and professional immersion, and persuades people to share tools and know-how. They show people that there are other pathways, which others have been down before, and other places or ways of putting on a show that others have modeled successfully in independent theatreland or elsewhere. They facilitate the gathering of people for activities that educate, entertain or otherwise improve the situation somehow. Their activities foster a sense of animation, community, solidarity, shared identity, and empathy. Together with the community, they are building a treasure chest or tool shed for people to reach in for resources, and to leave behind useful items for others.

The RISER Project helps independent theatremakers get shows up on stage faster than if these makers had to locate funding, support, resources, audiences, media and places to show their work on their own. The RISER Project is a kind of an artistic accelerator. Sometimes known as a booster in entrepreneurial circles. Like a bigger brother, sister or friend, The RISER Project helps give people a boost so they can get inside a nice building like The Theatre Centre to work for a while. In fact, it does not take just one bigger brother, sister or friend: The RISER Project consists of many people

— from the staff of senior partner companies, to grantmakers at Toronto Arts Council, Ontario Arts Council and Canadian Heritage, to the staff of Why Not Theatre — making a rather ambitious human pyramid of cheque signers, producers, supporters, mentors, lighting designers, technicians etc. All so that a small, select group of independents in co-residence can climb up above the crowded

landscape of independent theatreland and share their talents with the world.

The following overviews of Generator and The RISER Project provide a more fulsome account of what each venture entails. From these overviews, some possibilities are suggested for the future of independent theatreland.



Map for fun. Not to scale, not accurate nor representative.

Suggestion: Draw your own map. Or draw over this one. What would you emphasize? What does your drawing leave out?





## A CASE STUDY: GENERATOR

### What is Generator?

*Generator is becoming a place where artist-driven companies and creators can go to get all the resources they need to self-produce. I think they're unrivalled for being dedicated to helping people figure that out [...] I can't think of a place where people are so focused on that work.*

(Participant in Generator's artist producer training program)

Generator is commonly known as a capacity building and mentoring organization for independent performance makers. Previously focused on theatre, the organization is now, as of summer 2017, highlighting its capacity to include others within the performing arts, including dance and interdisciplinary and culturally diverse practices that do not emphasize one discipline over another. Prior to 2014, Generator was known as the Small Theatre Administrative Facility (STAF), and offered marketing and arts administration services to independent artists and companies at subsidized rates. The renaming of STAF to Generator represented a deep transformation of the organization from being a support services organization that was hired to “do things” for artists and companies, to being one that helps artists and companies “do it yourself.”

For the past two years, from 2015/2016 to 2016/2017, Generator has focused on roughly four areas of activities:

- **Training** — Their flagship Artist Producer Training (APT) program selects approximately eight individuals annually, through a competitive application and interview process, for the

opportunity to be paid a modest stipend (\$1000) for one year while attending classes twice a week at Generator's offices for eighteen weeks. Classes are taught by industry professionals; past instructors have included producers and artistic and managing directors of some of Toronto's large cultural institutions, as well as the smaller, project-based Resident Companies (see below for an explanation of “Resident Companies”). Classroom styles range from workshops to lecture-presentation to facilitated discussion. Following those eighteen weeks, the last semester of the training program consists entirely of a practicum whereby each trainee is placed inside a different professional arts organization to learn about producing “on site.” These placements are sometimes less like a job, and more of an opportunity to shadow, observe and ask questions. Generator also offers periodic public workshops on a one-off basis that anyone may attend at very low cost (\$20 each).

- **Coaching** — Officially, individualized coaching services are primarily for Resident Companies, which are two project-based theatre companies, typically in a period of consolidation or growth, that are given free office space for one year. Informally, APT program participants (current trainees and alumni), are also coached as the need arises. Unofficially, Generator reports that people (beyond APT and Resident Company participants) call them for advice “all the time.” In this sense, Generator operates an informal help line for independents who may not have

somewhere else to turn to for a quick collegial check-in: “Am I making the right decision?” “Is this typical?” “What should I do?” “What would you do?”

- **ArtistProducerResource.com** — Resources created or made available by guest instructors and Resident Companies through the APT program have been culled to populate the first-ever wiki for artist producers. Scheduled for launch in Nov 2017, the wiki is intended to opensource (and crowdsource) the kind of knowledge that APT trainees have been learning, along with budget templates and other resources so that independent theatremakers do not have to “reinvent the wheel” every time someone decides to put on a show.
- **Convening conversations** — To develop leadership, Generator also works in partnership with other organizations, to bring people together for conversations that help advance issues, or that support practitioners, such as when the topic is about “Mid-Career Struggles: How to get your mojo back.” Usually these conversations are live tweeted under the hashtag #UrgentExchange. On more than one occasion, these conversations have been written up in the media for their frank, candid discussion of challenging topics. One example is “The White Guy Shuffle,” which was a conversation on how to change hiring practices in Canada to empower diverse leadership that is reflective of Canada as a society. The “White Guy Shuffle” #UrgentExchange took place in January 2017, after seven prominent artistic-director positions in Canada were all filled by “white men,” over a period of six months. (Three of the positions had previously been held by “white women.”)

Generator is a complex and ambitious two-person organization. During the course of this study, Generator staff were winding down former (fee-for-service) STAF programs while simultaneously refining, fleshing out and starting up newly-established and not-yet-implemented programs

related to and possibly moving beyond the four focus areas listed above. The research process did not include analysis of all of Generator’s many activities.

### **What makes Generator great? What has it succeeded in doing?**

*Generator brings together really smart, hustle-oriented people.*

(Generator Resident company member)

There are very few places in Toronto where one can train specifically to be a theatre producer.<sup>2</sup> As small as the program may be, Generator’s APT program for 8 producers a year may be the largest in the city, possibly in the country, and the only one specializing in training independent “artist producers.” As one APT guest instructor puts it:

*There are leadership programs now, all over the place. They’re useful but it’s not the same. [...] Event planning is not the same. There’s a lot of applicable, cross-pollinating skills, of course, but my understanding of that — doing industrial shows, weddings... It’s not performance. It’s not art.*

And while other arts organizations offer artistic residencies to independent companies, Generator may be the only place in where independent companies can go for organizational residencies.

Generally speaking, the significance of Generator’s sector development work may be described as supporting the development of peer and personal resources, curated communities and conversations, and organizational resources for the contemporary independent theatre company.

### **1. Peer and personal resources, or What it takes to hustle**

A Norwegian study published in 2014 looked at the careers of freelance musicians and identified “an unpredictable future, threats to the family/work balance and significant amounts of external pressure” as key sources of “demands” that contribute to

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2 Luminato, a multidisciplinary arts festival, offers a program for one emerging producer per year. Soulpepper Academy’s 2016 – 2018 cohort of 15 theatre artists includes two theatre producers-in-training.

poor mental health among these artists. The study found that “social support” and “adequate personal resources” are important “buffers” to meet the demands of a freelance artist’s life (Vaag et al 2014). Social support includes family and friends, as well as a professional network of contacts to whom one could turn for help, advice or empathy. Personal resources include: “entrepreneurial skills, value-anchored flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity,” and passion for the art. This Norwegian study is a helpful entry point into understanding the value of the totality of what Generator is building up. Generator helps freelance, self-managing theatremakers flourish, by helping them develop their professional peer network and personal resources. As a hub, Generator offers a complex package of vital peer and personal resources: from social support (professionals who understand one’s line of work, who share some of the same lived experiences), to entrepreneurial skills (hard and soft skills), capacity to be flexible in a way that is rooted in one’s deepest values (to be meaningful or worthwhile), tolerance for ambiguity or uncertainty (typically both), and ability to remain connected with one’s intrinsic motivation (desire) to be an independent theatremaker.

## 2. Curating & connecting community & conversations, or Who’s a hustler

Staff interviews generated some discussion of their community - or sector-building activities. As well, public materials (Generator website and social media feeds) were briefly reviewed, which gave more specificity and context for their community-building activities. Some of these community- and conversation-building activities are less formal; some are unusual. One might even say experimental. Examples include:

- [Generator’s vlog](#) (video blog);
- [#UrgentExchange](#) events
- [SLIP](#) — the Summerworks Leadership Intensive Program, of which Generator is a producing partner

The speakers, topics and content across many of these activities are fresh (as opposed to tired, or typical) and present in a smart, savvy, “right on the money” kind of way. The language is current: This

summer, for example, one of the SLIP events was a workshop on *decolonizing performance practice*. A recent #UrgentExchange conversation, held at the Fringe Festival, was on “*Work/Work Balance: How can we balance what we do for love vs what we do to live.*” When asked about how the organization might impart its method to others for staging frank, open conversations like #UrgentExchanges, former executive director Michael Wheeler suggested:

First, you need people who are on the panel that people are interested in hearing from. So, usually not the usual people that are on panels, and people who might say controversial things. [...] And then the second thing is to sit down with your partners and talk about what are the things that people are talking about privately in bars and after shows but aren’t happening in a public forum?

By curating topics that are being whispered or bandied about in informal settings by colleagues, and pointedly inviting people who are “not the usual suspects” to speak to these topics, Generator is curating and cultivating a culture that feels relevant and edgy to independent theatremakers. Their marketing copy uses a heady mix of upbeat, “ready for a challenge” language. The casual or informal quality to their vlogs and social media feeds builds on this, foregrounding Generator’s scrappy, bootstrapping, “got it, doing it” values and attitudes. The effect might be like a beacon for independent theatre and other performance makers. “*Hey, over here, join in, we’re your kind of people. We know you. We believe in you.*”

*Prior to Generator, I hadn’t had a lot of opportunities to meet like-minded people. [...] APT is for people who are self-starters, driven, wanting to take control of their own careers, and wanting to make positive change in whatever field they work in.*

(Generator APT program participant)

*I felt the residency really worked to legitimize the act of working on theatre every day, as opposed to coffee shops or whatever. [...] You feel like you’re part of something. Like somebody gives a shit what you and your compatriots are doing. You have a home. You’re not just relegated to dark and dusty corners.*

(Generator Resident Company member)



*The camaraderie with companies being in the same space - these companies, we all have a lot in common. We're also all different. We can commiserate and also give advice and learn from each other.*

(Generator Resident Company member)

### **3. Organizational resources, or How to hustle as a company**

Interviews with Resident Companies suggest that for these small, project-based companies, Generator is a “game changer.” Resident Companies are awarded free office space at Generator to help them consolidate around concrete, self-identified organizational goals. Having time and space to consolidate and reflect as an organization, is vital for companies that are no longer “emerging” but operating at the level of the “establishing”<sup>3</sup>:

*Having it allowed us to think in a different way.*

*[It's] changing the way that we make theatre, changing the landscape and reality of independent artists.*

The residency allows the companies to experiment with reorganizing how they work or redistributing how responsibilities are managed. Generator staff are

available on a scheduled and ad-hoc basis to provide advice and guidance around these goals and any other issues that might come up while companies are in residence.

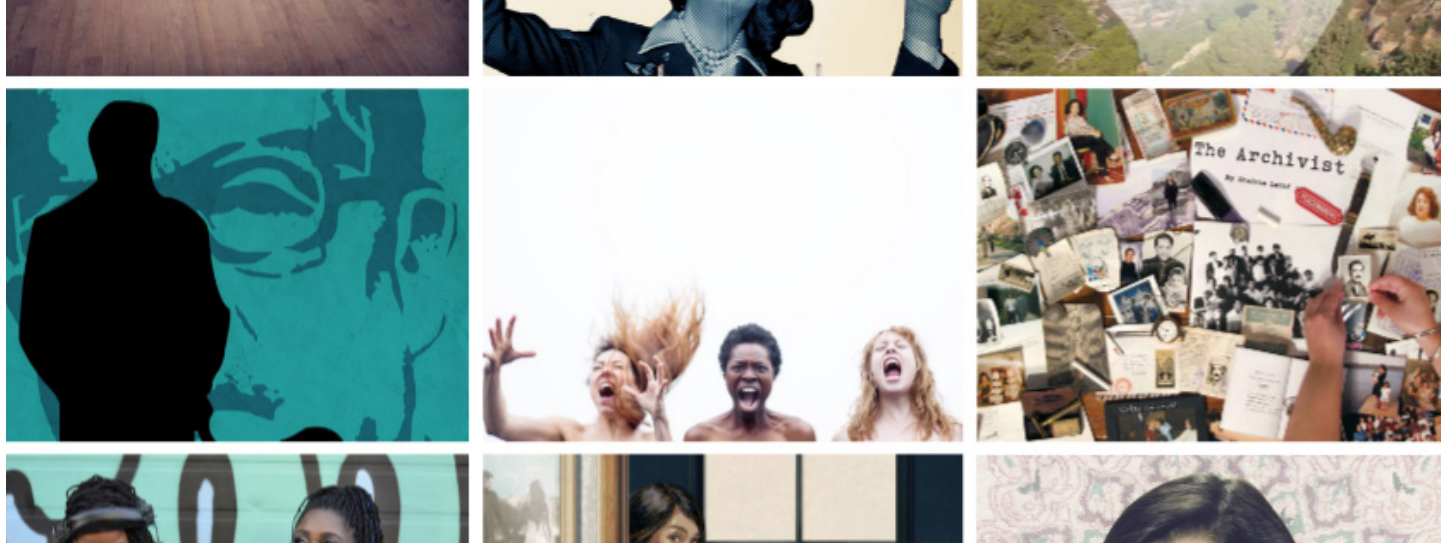
*Within two weeks of approaching [Generator] with what felt like a huge, terrifying crisis, I felt like I was on track to figuring it out and finding resources, and just being reassured that what I suspected wasn't right, was in fact not. [...] If I had been at home dealing with this alone, I may have imploded. [...] I came out of it feeling like I know who to go to, not to solve all my problems, but to help lead me in the direction of solving the problems myself.*

Kristina Lemieux, Generator's executive director, is careful about avoiding “arborous language” about growth and development that would imply these companies are trying to get bigger or mature in a conventional sense. While growth can be an organizational goal, Lemieux suggests that for some, the goal may be to scale back the number or frequency of productions so as to achieve a better “work/work/life” balance.<sup>4</sup> Scaling back or not striving to grow bigger can also mean that the shows a company does mount can benefit from more focus, and result in a higher quality product.

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3 A few interviewees referred to three categories of independent artists: emerging, establishing and established. Borrowing from these distinctions, an “establishing” company might be described as one in which organizational expenses are not all covered by organizational revenues, relying instead, on personal cash and/or in-kind contributions.

4 The phrase “work/work/life” is used by Generator to refer to the common lifestyle for independent makers to have to balance both work that pays the bills, and one's own artistic work, as well as life.



## A CASE STUDY: THE RISER PROJECT

### What is The RISER Project?

The RISER Project is a collaborative and charitable approach to production and presentation.<sup>5</sup> Each year, approximately four theatre productions are invited to co-produce and co-present together — with the charitable support of [senior partner](#) organizations, as well as with the stewardship of Why Not Theatre. [The shows](#), which are projects led and created by independent theatremakers, receive a run of at least two weeks at The Theatre Centre, a prestigious venue for independent theatre that is simultaneously historic in its origins and ‘contemporary cool’ in ambiance and setting.

Traditionally in theatre, it is the job of the producer or production company to gather the money and resources to create (develop) a show and put it on stage in front of an audience. Typically, the hope is that a presenter will want to program the show and pay the company a presentation fee, and/or a cut of the box office, which helps offset the creation and production costs. With The RISER Project, some of these conventional roles and responsibilities are being re-configured and remixed across all groups involved.

In The RISER Project, senior partner organizations pool together resources, cash and/

or in-kind, to help get shows on stage without expectation of repayment or cost recovery. “It’s a gift.” The senior partners are established theatre companies led by salaried artistic staff, typically with salaried administrative support. All the senior partner companies were themselves, not so long ago, emerging, project-based endeavours run by independent artists. Their contributions range from cash (several thousand dollars) to free rehearsal or office space, an open invitation for RISER participants to call if they need advice or a sounding board, and offers of dramaturgical feedback, if desired.

Why Not Theatre, perhaps the youngest of theatre companies to receive operating support from all three levels of arts councils, plays a major part in weaving together the “buy-in” and support from senior partners. Through additional funding from the Department of Canadian Heritage and Toronto Arts Council’s Open Door program,<sup>6</sup> Why Not Theatre has heavily subsidized production costs for RISER shows: They have been able to cover the cost of the presentation space and technicians at The Theatre Centre, shared lighting designers, and shared marketing and public relations support. Why Not Theatre does not usually pay presentation fees to RISER shows. As such, it is up to the RISER shows to self-fund their other creation and production costs,

5 In the performing arts community, ‘production’ generally refers to the creative and technical processes that help to create a show. This would usually include contracts, rehearsals, lighting/set/costume/sound design, etc. ‘Presentation’ refers to the dissemination or ‘showing’ processes that bring audience and show together. This would include marketing, presentation space (where the show will take place), box office, front of house, etc.

6 Toronto Arts Council’s Open Door program is a funding opportunity designed to respond to “timely and ambitious” arts sector initiatives. The RISER Project’s substantial seed grant from this program ends this year.

such as hiring actors, paying for set and costumes, and any additional rehearsal hours beyond what is offered through The RISER Project.

Why Not Theatre's producers work directly with each show to help identify needs, questions, and ways to cooperate and collaborate across shows to make everyone's intentions possible. They provide guidance, help troubleshoot if necessary and provide behind-the-scenes support around box office and marketing. RISER participants are adamant that the level of producing and production support is well-beyond the typical support offered within a festival context:

*I've [been in] festivals where we have a lighting designer consultant and this was not that. [The lighting designer] was fantastic. He was there in rehearsals. He very much took on the show as his own. Even coming out to opening night and having drinks. That was really cool. He wasn't just a hire. He joined the team. And that's really tricky to do. [When] you haven't been hired technically by the artists building the show... To integrate yourself to the show, and to the level that he did. That was really great.*

Clearly, what distinguishes The RISER Project from other extant presenting or producing models is the investment by and cooperation between the many players. Not least, is the investment by participating companies — the independent artists, producers, performance collectives and project-based theatre companies whose shows are being created and mounted in The RISER Project. They "RISE" to the occasion, says one interviewee, bringing their "A-game" to creating and producing their shows. As another interviewee put it, "you're up against people working really hard. The pressure is on." They are also given the responsibility of meeting box office targets.

*You gotta sell the show. You gotta hit [the] box office targets [...] because if we don't hit it, we're all screwed and RISER won't happen again. The fun reality is the transparency. If we don't hit it, we're screwed.*

## What's in it for everyone?

### Senior partners

When asked why they gift to these projects, senior partners cite "sharing the wealth" and "giving back" among their reasons. Each of the following quotes are from a different senior partner:

*It's getting bigger fish to resource share, so the smaller fish can have a chance.*

*It introduces us to new, smart, creative, talented people.*

*It's equal parts generosity and good citizenship, as well as a financially-viable solution to creating more work. It's the feeling of what a community should be.*

*It keeps us closer to the indie community [...] I think it can be a bit of a wild wilderness out there for all those indie companies trying to be seen. [...] But it's harder to overlook when you're associated with their work, they've rehearsed in your studio. You're like the big sister. It's a good way to align larger companies with indie work.*

All the senior partners pointed to the obvious, what many called "no-brainer" reasons to participate: It's a good cause; it's easy because Why Not Theatre does all the heavy lifting (producing, facilitating, organizing); and there's tremendous value alignment for resource-strapped companies looking for more ways to support independent theatre. The senior partners also spoke openly about additional motivations.

*I was just realizing it was time... that the company had been around a long time... thinking about my place, the company's place... how it stays visible and active in the community when we're having a year when we don't put on a show. How do we still maintain presence in the community? Who are we in the community?*

*When we talk about our involvement, people are interested and it's something people ask questions about. Our funders are thrilled that we're part of it. It's something juries find really exciting. It's really exciting to tell our Board because it's completely different, and to be honest, it's not a lot of work we have to do for it. [...]*



*Although it requires cash, it doesn't require a lot of people power. Which is fantastic because there's only two of us.*

While there are many motivations in the mix, the sincerity of the senior partners seems irrefutable. When the shows go up, senior partners are there at opening night. They may invite other influencers and presenters to attend. Their public support of The RISER Project already attracts or helps persuade others to come see the shows for themselves. These contacts and introductions, combined with the “hustle-oriented” attitude of RISER participants, and the quality of the artistic product, can result, and have resulted in touring engagements, presentation offers and support for continued development or new projects. Several senior partners spoke warmly about a feeling of pride generated by The RISER Project:

*You see the work that gets made. You can see the success of the show. I can see my [rehearsal] space in this. I can see myself in this. I can see that the artists were able to make something special [because we were part of this].*

### **The Theatre Centre**

The Theatre Centre has been involved with The RISER Project since well before it got its name. Franco Boni, artistic director of The Theatre Centre, recalls the early period when he and Ravi Jain, artistic director of Why Not Theatre, were discussing ideas that led to the development of The RISER Project:

*I remember us agreeing that residency for artists that are younger, is very challenging. Because they are in a generative period. Which means they just want to make work. They want to make as much work as possible. And that makes sense because they're trying to figure out — aesthetics — what their aesthetic is and what they want to say, and you know, it's kind of — it makes sense. [...] And so it grew out of a conversation about opportunity, [about] how to create opportunities for young artists who just want to make work. And don't want the long-term development and all that kind of stuff.*

In their interviews, RISER participants emphasized the kind of “profile” and “notoriety” that comes with the opportunity to be part of The RISER Project. Beyond Why Not Theatre's significant

artistic reputation, The Theatre Centre is perhaps an understated essential element in the alchemy that makes RISER projects seem “special.” As one RISER participant noted, “[another great thing is that] it happens at The Theatre Centre which has amazing energy.” As a presenter, The Theatre Centre is recognized throughout Canada. As a venue, its premises are inviting, contemporary, and beautiful. As an organization, The Theatre Centre has a long history of *being* the independent artists doing the interesting, ambitious things.

### **Artistic participants**

What all the participating shows get, as a result of all these groups pooling resources for their benefit, is an opportunity to own their moment under the stage lights. They can premiere work with more tech time (three days) and more performance dates (two weeks) than is typical for a project-based, self-producing, not-yet-established artist or company. As well, artists perform in front of more media and influencers than would typically show up for a “no name” independent theatre production, as one participant characterized their group's status.

*You can make a lot out of this situation, if you hustle. It's really more useful for people who really want to hustle and work for it.*

There is also an atmosphere of striving, and appreciation for people who “grab the bull by the horns.” The excitement is palpable.

*You're hustling to make sure the quality of your show is fucking fantastic, because then you'll stand out. There's a nice competitive aspect to it.*

Across interviews, past participants and staff say the model works best for people with some experience and enormous appetite to do everything and try anything. The RISER Project works best for people who are excited and motivated about the prospect of being on stage for two weeks and will give the opportunity everything they can as artists and as producers. In a few interviews, participants were individuals who already had what they viewed as a steady history of self-presenting their own

shows. One company reported employing more or less the same marketing and PR strategy used with previous shows, resulting in more or less the same audience attendance rates. Based on the limited interviews conducted, it would seem that participants experience greater fulfillment when they approach the process as if the opportunity were a remarkable occurrence — responding with unusual boldness, ingenuity or energy onstage and offstage to capitalize on the occasion.

For artists who do not have work presented regularly in the mainstream or public eye, The RISER Project is an important introduction or induction into the world of mainstream theatre. Between the relative luxury of time to produce work in a professional, supported context, and the absolute artistic freedom that interviewees felt they were given, The RISER Project is seen by many participants as a unique and excellent opportunity to manifest their theatrical ideas. Several interviewees stated in no uncertain terms that as artists they felt they had complete freedom to realize their visions as they wish, something that Why Not Theatre staff have also emphasized. One participant, for example, performed their show six times over two weeks. Each show involved a different lighting design and a different audience-performance space configuration. The production was essentially six different shows. After premiering at The RISER Project, the ambitious show has been programmed since at several other festivals. Indeed, the participants' experiences suggest that The RISER Project is a model that has demonstrably enabled artists to have a context and opportunity to prove there *is* a market for their “risky” or “ambitious” ideas about content and/or

form that other festivals or presentation formats are not able to accommodate.

Interviewees spoke to how, post-RISER, when pitching ideas or speaking to other artists, producers or presenters, they can refer to the work that they showed in The RISER Project. “And people will go, ‘oh OK, yeah I know what you’re talking about.’” Sometimes the boost can be about demonstrating a track record affiliated with recognized and respected names. Other times, or at the same time, it can be that what an artist creates is experimental or unconventional. Describing something that someone has never seen before is challenging, let alone persuading them to invest confidence and money in the work and in you. Prior experience with someone’s work creates a tacit form of understanding: *This is what this person’s aesthetic is. This is how they think, work, or what their work feels like.*

Alongside all this, a number of interviewees spoke to how The RISER Project was “an amazing opportunity to really understand what producing is like.” One participant compared their experience post-RISER as a playwright getting a play picked up for a production:

*I got the playwrighting minimum [fee] for that. And then I produced another play on my own and I got paid five times that. And a lot of that knowledge was what I learned from Why Not and what we did at RISER. [...] They’re instilling really really valuable producing skills in the artists who work under the RISER umbrella. And that has had a huge impact on me. I’m not beholden to any company. I can do it myself and get more people out. So [it’s a] win win win win.*

## REVIEWING THEIR JOURNEYS

Looking at the giga maps created by the two venture organizations, Generator's map has a clear administrative feel to it. Their story is tidily organized into months as well as years. The theatre community is visualized as a cloud to and from which Generator uploads and downloads information such as calls for submissions, feedback, crowdsourcing ideas, etc. Generator's map tracks the journey of the transformation: from announcing the transformation, to shutting down the publicity and marketing services provided in the old fee-for-service model, to the public Opensource Brainstorm event that informed the development of the APT program, to a rebranding announcement, followed by a new name announced, to the arrival of each APT cohort and Resident Companies, to the arrivals and departures of staff and Board members, to key proposals submitted and funding received, all the way to current work and projected milestones. In this map, personal life moments (engagements, marriage) are part of the narrative. The map also draws attention to the human cost beneath the transformation story for Generator: The old fee-for-service model was "supported by a crazy amount of work," the map indicates, and an expressive line below oscillates emphatically, visualizing the "side effect" of frustrations with the old model. The map reflects stories shared by staff in interviews: the strain, friction and stress on staff and clients to continue operating under the fee-for-service model was a significant motivator for STAF to undergo a transformation.<sup>7</sup> To the outsider, the map suggests that STAF burned out, had a mid-life crisis or epiphany, reinvented itself a few years ago and has been happily living as Generator ever since.

The map drawn by Why Not Theatre develops a narrative about the experiences that artistic director Ravi Jain and the company have gone through over the years. The storytelling points to defining experiences — crisis moments — that account for the way this company has been formed, with its particular concerns about talented but undervalued artists, the development of the company's *ethos*, its character, and in particular, its value sets, what it stands for, what it believes in, how it tries to manifest these principles through conscious choices. Why Not Theatre's map also tracks the major shifts in focus: from "I see a need and think we should try to solve it," to "what can this be? what is the right model?" to "OK that had some wrinkles in it," to "hey we can get money to do this," to the many successes of year one, followed by continued development of the model, adding an open call, developing the selection process, refining after year two, to wondering how to balance Why Not Theatre's productions with RISER productions, including the alumni whose shows are taking off and need a producer to help manage the opportunities, to, of course, wondering from where will money come to allow The RISER Project to continue. The theatre community is modeled in specific moments (e.g. jury in The RISER Project's selection process) and represented elsewhere by scattered dots radiating out from under mid-sized theatre companies who in turn sit underneath the largest theatre companies in Ontario. Why Not Theatre is visualized as a small dot entering the mid-sized theatre cluster with lines radiating out, looping around other even tinier dots below — depicting their *modus operandi* to advance while bringing others from below with them.

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7 Generator staff emphasize that the business reason for changing the model was that artists' and artistic companies' shrinking revenues were insufficient to afford the old fee-for-service model, even when those services were heavily subsidized.







## REFLECTING ON THE CASE STUDIES

Overall, Generator and The RISER Project are largely achieving what they set out to do. Generator is helping to equip independent theatremakers with peer-sourced training, guidance, answers, resources and space to do their work with less “reinvention of the wheel” and more support. Katie Leamen, Director of Coordination and Communications at Generator reports that graduates of their APT program are in high demand as producers and collaborating artists. Generator’s Resident Companies are building competencies and continuing to produce high-quality productions as evidenced by the awards they are winning. The RISER Project is helping independent theatremakers present work on stage and in front of media, industry contacts, and audiences sooner, or in a “bigger,” “louder,” or more fulsome way than would otherwise be feasible. Empirically, at least half the shows in The RISER Project (two out of four) each year receive some form of continued development, when desired by the artist(s), with at least one show each year (25% of shows produced) receiving support or an invitation to remount the production or take it on tour.

How are Generator and The RISER Project working toward success? Some common strategies used by the two ventures include:

**Acceleration:** Strategically investing resources at a critical time in the lifespan of the project and/or career of the individual to help advance the project and/or individual more rapidly or profoundly. New or better jobs or opportunities may come up, but there is inner work too. Interviewees from both ventures spoke to how their experiences (within Generator and The RISER Project) led to their practices changing, enabling deep shifts or transformations in outlook, self-concept, or self-understanding as an artist.

**Immersion:** Providing a deep dive, or a kind of ‘anticipatory socialization’ experience.<sup>8</sup> Placing the

individual and/or project in immediate contact with the world of professional theatre making – facilitating conversations, contacts and opportunities to acquire social and intellectual capital, to learn the norms, behaviours and language, and to be seen or noticed by those with influence and decision-making power.

**Coaching:** Working with the individual and with companies through their lived experiences, or providing examples drawn from others’ lived experiences, to guide them, improve awareness, deepen understanding, discuss options and alternatives, ask questions, bring in additional resources and help work toward their goals. Unlike mentorship, coaching tends to be short-term and task-oriented, focused on work outcomes.

**Co-Residencies:** Placing individuals and projects side-by-side in context. That is, in the same context. Co-habiting the same conceptual and working space where cross-dialogue is expected (required) creates a reflective peer group, or a community of practice. This grouping of people and/or projects can trigger self-comparison and comparison by others. To keep the competitive spirit friendly, mutually nourishing, culture is important.

**Culture:** Cultivating and curating for attitudes, customs, beliefs, aspirations, language, rituals and stories that relate to generosity, compassion, professionalism, kindness, open-mindedness, collaboration, peer-to-peer learning, initiative, self-motivation, self-actualization, self-efficacy, gumption, willingness to ‘hustle’, and other elements that contribute to better communities, better neighbours, better sense of self, higher work performance and higher quality of life. Promoting a wide, inclusive sense of camaraderie and mutuality.

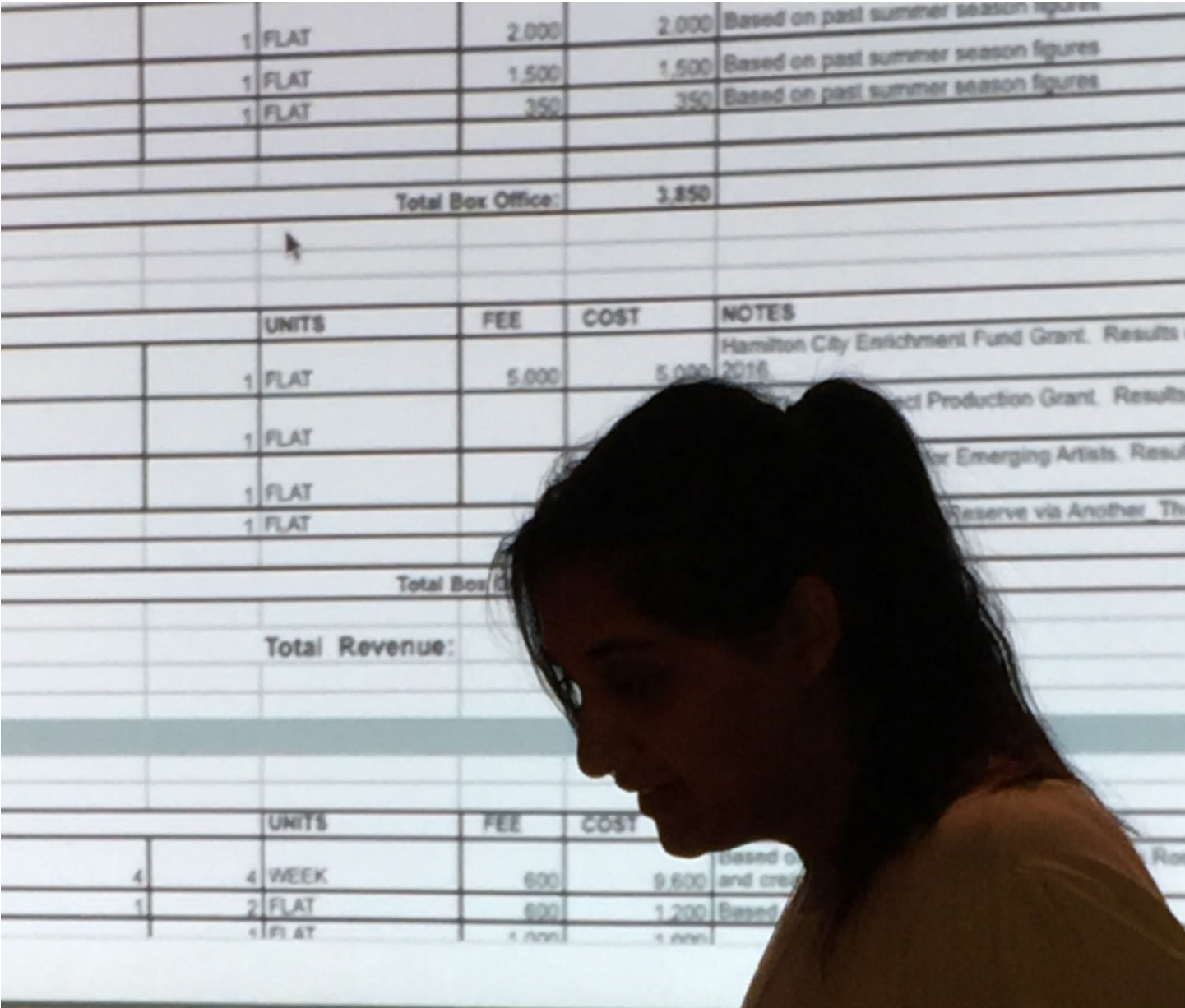
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8 “Through a kind of anticipatory socialization, the mobile individual adopts the attitudes, values, and judgmental standards of the class to which he aspires, but does not belong. This anticipatory socialization, so long as the class system is relatively open, serves the twin functions of helping the mobile individual to overcome the subcultural barriers confronting him and of easing his social acceptance in the stratum to which he moves” (Lane and Ellis, 1968)

**Collectivity:** Believing, and *taking the risk to act on the belief*, that together is better — that there are problems that cannot be solved in isolation. That the better future is co-authored all together.

Both Generator and The RISER Project inspire and enable independent theatremakers to take their life and work into their own hands. Many participants expressed a sense of empowerment and a kind of satisfaction or fulfillment at having agency, or in popular parlance, “owning their power.” If what they want is not happening for them, they can *and do* make things happen for themselves. They pick up the pace when they want to.

As case studies, Generator and The RISER Project suggest a new genre of arts leadership. The two ventures represent a hustle-oriented community, a devising community, a community that says “people first,” the new norm being a start-up attitude (“throwing things at the wall to see what sticks”) toward *anything* and maybe everything — art, organization, collaboration, entrepreneurialism and “being evaluated.” Independent theatreland is being developed by a new genre of artistic leaders who will gamely, as Owais Lightwala, Managing Director of Why Not Theatre puts it, “imagine more” around something if the people they are championing feel it is important.





## DRAWING OUT SOME CRITICAL QUESTIONS

### The business perspective

As sector developers, both ventures innovate on the side of supply chain and production processes: How best to support independent artists, how to legitimize theatremaking and theatre production, how to help independent art be produced better and more often, how best to support the flourishing of the independent theatre community — these are the kinds of questions with which Generator and The RISER Project are engaged. The term “incubator” was used by interviewees from both ventures to describe the developmental opportunity that these ventures offer independent artists and companies.

In a 2013 Harvard Business Review article entitled, “The Problems with Incubators, and How to Solve Them,” author Sramana Mitra argues that for incubators to “live up to their full economic potential,” they need to provide “real value, not just office space, *and they need to measure success in more than just outside funding*” (emphasis added).

*[W]hether a business can get off the ground successfully and sustainably [is about] a validated market opportunity with customers willing to pay [...] and a product or service that addresses such an opportunity. The only incubators I consider “real” are the ones that help entrepreneurs achieve these goals.*

Where both cases studies could further innovate, according to the business mindset, or perhaps what other new or existing sector developers could emerge to take on, is work focused on customers. Having customers lessens the burden of having to find funding. For artists and arts organizations to achieve independence within a capitalist context, they need to find customers interested in what they have to offer. Artists and producers need people who will purchase (hire) their services. Companies need presenters who will purchase (program) their show. Everyone eventually needs audiences. Cut out the middle people (those that hire producers, those that program artists) and the penultimate customer is the audience.

### The systems perspective

Systems thinkers suggest there are leverage points in systems that can be activated, or acted upon to try to create systems-wide change. These leverage points include: physical structures (including how a system is physically organized); flows (how information, feedback, finance or value is distributed, configured or interrelated); rules that dictate how the system is organized (e.g. incentives, punishments, constraints); self-organization (the capacity of a system to add, change or evolve aspects of itself); system goal (its purpose or believed function); and paradigms (the mindset out of which the system arises).

One interviewee observed, “[APT] is definitely making the process of putting on these shows tangibly better. It’s just not changing the money flow, basically, which is the fundamental issue that the theatre community faces.” The interviewee, a Generator APT program participant, noted that it’s “philosophically interesting” to be giving a small group of people such a substantial advantage over others. “That’s what training is, but it’s not like, the inputs in the theatre community — in terms of grant funding, resources, audience base, and all that — those are not being affected by programs like this.” The interviewee went on to wonder if “the polish of the grants and publicity” that APT graduates are now able to produce might negatively affect the system as a whole, creating “another barrier to entry” in a sector that may already feel rife with challenges.

So on the one hand, Generator is developing and producing effective producers. On the other hand, the “money flow” in the independent theatre sector is not changing... or is it? Can it?

There is, in fact, more money flowing into the arts sector as a whole. Toronto Arts Council’s budget grew from \$12M to \$18M between 2012 – 2016, which has led to significant opportunities to shift things around locally, including the creation of the Open Door program that funded in part Generator’s transformation from STAF and Why Not Theatre’s iterative development of The RISER Project. By 2021, Canada Council for the Arts will

see its annual budget of \$182 million (nearly) double to \$360 million. By 2021 as well, the Ontario Arts Council's annual budget of \$60 million will increase to \$80 million. Both these latter increases are set to take place incrementally. There are hopes that the new funding model at the Canada Council for the Arts, which had been planned and was well underway before this budget announcement, will result in significant shifts in who is getting funded. Will the increase in financial flow reach many of the independent theatremakers in Toronto? Will the budget increases remain if political winds shift? Much remains to be seen.

The other flows, as the interviewee pointed out, are resources and audiences. These resources might include: physical resources such as rehearsal and presentation spaces, possibly building spaces (for constructing sets and costumes, testing elaborate video projection rigs); and advertising space, in all its forms, online, offline, on screen, on page, on phones, etc. Another interviewee, a senior partner in The RISER Project, also identified spaces as being a sectoral issue:

*We have a lot of these 200-seaters that we treat as mid-size but there's nothing under that. And there's nothing above it until you get to the Elgin. We have studio spaces that are a part of those larger institutions but they're still part of the larger institutions. There's not a real circuit of smaller houses.*

Some of these leverage points have been addressed by funders over the years: investment in new buildings and neighbourhood hubs, for example, or new and modified funding programs based on new ways of thinking about the arts and artists in society, such as community-engaged practices.

What is most interesting about leverage points, however, is that systems theorists say, "although people deeply involved in a system often intuitively know where to find leverage points, more often than not they push the change in the *wrong direction*." Complex systems can require a counterintuitive logic. Pushing levers the wrong way may mean "*systematically* worsening whatever problems we are trying to solve" (Meadows 2008, emphasis added).

Audiences, for example, have been an aspect of the system that people have been trying to "develop" for years. Is it the audience that needs developing, or is it the artists? Or is it the art?

As a thought experiment, the counterintuitive systems logic may be to abandon the buildings, or to change our relationship with them. It may be that, actually, engaging people outside the buildings is easy. Perhaps people are easy to engage and it is audiences that are hard to pursue, or developing audiences that is an obstruction. Rather than seeking to settle theatremaking down into fixed spaces, or viewing nomadic or alternative practices as compromise ("making lemonade"), perhaps the appropriate logic for the future is to embrace adventure and humility. The future of independent theatre could be to travel away from theatre, to walk further into audienceland. Some independent theatremakers are already there, some have long been working in unusual parts of audienceland. The future of theatre may depend on loosening the view that the people "out there" need to be "developed."

Historically, Toronto's theatre scene consists of somewhat distinct waves of theatre companies: Those that were founded in the early '70s with a mandate of promoting (creating) the Canadian identity (responding to Expo '67); those that were founded later in the '80s with a mandate to serve alternative artistic visions; then those founded in the '90s and early 2000s to pluralize cultural voices. These generalizations are gross – but perhaps not altogether useless. Looking at the alternative approaches to theatre-making favoured by Resident Companies in Generator and popular shows in The RISER Project, it might be suggested that another wave of theatre companies is already emerging. Many of Generator's Resident Companies are mandated to make performances in alternative or site-specific spaces. Some might explain these "alternative venue" mandates as being a function of not having affordable access to regular theatre venues. While this constraint may be true, perhaps "making do" has been, as well, a form of "making right." Systems theorists suggest that systems exhibit self-regulating tendencies. Whether they were once motivated by "making do," independent

theatre companies like Outside the March are winning awards and accolades, all the while engaged adventurously with the question of where and how to engage audiences more directly.

To produce a major system shift, more independent theatremakers might visit and seek places where they might be situated more directly with potential audiences. They might listen and observe first. They might ask if their presence is wanted. They might ask what is the right way to engage with people you don't know? What does theatre look like in the future, *in* audienceland? Building trust, interest and mutuality between makers and audiences, independent theatremakers might pursue a kind of rhizomatic freedom: artistic licence to re-invent and re-imagine, rather than climbing a vertical ladder

toward being an established image of success. How will these re-imagined and re-invented practices transport back and translate inside the buildings in theatreland? Who are the leaders that will facilitate new, unusual, continued relations with diverse parts of audienceland? Who within audienceland are natural allies for Toronto theatre? How best to champion those on both sides of theatreland and audienceland, who are predisposed to exploration and discovery?

Looking at independent theatreland, are there other leverage points that you see? How might have some change been pushed in the wrong direction?

What clues signal that some change may be driving in the wrong direction, and that radical new approaches, radical new imaginaries are needed?





## FRUSTRATIONS

The following is a selection of candid thoughts shared by interviewees when asked, “what’s not working in the Toronto theatre sector.”

### Livelihoods and life choices

*I have to decide if I am going to continue on. I just got married this past year, we’re thinking about kids.*

*Right now I’m in a position where it’s gonna be really hard to keep going if I can’t make my full income from the arts. I work 3 days a week at an insurance firm. So that job is a really great ‘Joe job’. Right now that’s a really integral part of my survival. I don’t quite know how I’m going to continue in my career path. I just applied for an assistant directorship. The fee is \$425 a week which is not quite enough to live on. So I don’t know. I’ll have to be working a lot more if I’m gonna continue in this path.*

*We’re always wondering if we’re going to get to that next plateau. We have to work so hard to pay all our artists fair wages. [...] One of our core members [...] is about to have her second child. It’s just becoming clearer and clearer how hard it is to continue this lifestyle. And how much of a passion thing this is. [...] Before, there was a sense of an end goal. If you had stuck it out as long as we have, and had built an audience as much as we have, and have critical acclaim, [there was a sense] that you could gain stability and reach that critical plateau. Even those who are reaching that, it’s such a small amount, it’s not necessarily an end goal any more. A lot of us are still having to find stability in other careers, and doing this on the side. Which is a shame – when people have masters degrees, proven critical acclaim, proven audience support. That’s something that is disheartening, for people who have worked as hard as us.*

### Inequities

*We have cultural diversity — it’s not a lack. We have Native Earth, Obsidian, Fu-GEN. Little Black Afro. bcurrent. Buddies. We have all of these companies. But a sad side effect of the will to organize and make change ourselves [to create Native Earth, Obsidian, Fu-GEN etc] is that the larger institutions never had to do it. So they’re just so behind. The*

*problem with those [larger institutions] is that they’re run by old white men who don’t see the need to change themselves. They will only change by people going into those houses to say, no, this needs to be done. But they don’t, because [diverse artists] all have homes to go to. Which is a good thing, but it does have a side B to it.*

*[We’re seeing changes in] who’s on stage and being inclusive there, but it’s not happening backstage or in administration. So those leadership roles are not seeing a huge shift. In fact, we’re seeing burnout on that. We’re not seeing the next generations — people of colour, deaf people, people with disability. We’re not seeing that yet. That’s problematic to me. That means a lot of the changes are like changing the drapes, whereas we haven’t dealt with the mould or the foundation.*

*I feel we often downplay the amount of work and effort that goes into the work we do. [...] There’s that constant navigating and negotiating that happens. That’s a lot more difficult for certain groups than others. For a very long time, marginalized peoples’ work has been downplayed by relegating it to identity politics or personal storytelling. There’s a lot more work that we end up doing. I think we should be able to be public about that. About what it actually takes to do that.*

*Mostly I’m frustrated by the diversity, because we’re in Toronto and there’s no reason. Certain institutions need a shake up for many reasons. There’s still a culture of — the hierarchy of — that structure is just — I cannot tell you, it’s just so interesting and shocking to me how many young women have come to me, and who the hell am I, I have no power, I have no formal... I’m just a theatremaker... but [they come] to talk to me about how they’ve been sexually harassed either in the workplace or at school, by a teacher, or the AD of the theatre. I bring this up now with you because it just keeps happening where somebody tells me this and I don’t know what to do about it. Because it didn’t happen to me. And everybody knows about these people. And everybody seems to not be doing anything about it. And I bring that up when you ask me how the work can be better, because I can’t imagine it doesn’t affect the work. I can’t imagine it doesn’t affect the process. And how work is made. And the stories we tell. And most importantly, the stories we do not tell. So this sort of goes along with the money where the mouth is,*

*with the diversity. What is the culture here? What do we think is actually important? And I think we should be thinking as much about the process, whether that's our schools, our cultural institutions, like how they are run, what is — is childcare included in our institutions and in our schools? [...] Is not being sexually harassed a no-brainer? Is fairness and justice and cultural diversity a no-brainer part of the culture? ...Because if you can't answer yes to that, then I don't care about any show you're gonna make. I think the sustainability of the house, of the culture surrounding all these institutions, and companies and schools that are subsidized by taxpayer dollars need to be looked at as much as the end result, which is the play. I think if you start there, it will affect what the choices, what those plays are.*

### **Problems with the art**

*The risk in going to a live theatre show — the cost is high and an underrated element of the risk is how trapped you are in a theatre show. We've all had this experience: 30 seconds into the show, you know it's gonna be terrible and you have to sit there. And that sucks, so much. [...] In some ways, there's a low barrier to entry to people making independent theatre. If you're willing to suffer in the ways you have to to make indie theatre, that in and of itself is a qualification. So if a group of five people want to make a show, they'll make a show. And so a lot of that isn't good. But then it makes everyone mistrustful about what is there, and raises the risk around going to see live theatre. There's a bit of sense in training all these producers to give everybody good skills, good strategic publicity skills. [But] it just sort of becomes an arms race. We're all competing for the same group of people who are willing to take that risk.*

*I think there's a larger problem about the type of arts we see. What constitutes a performance is pretty rigid here. That's the biggest thing that should change.*

*Audience building is really really a challenge these days. For everybody. Maybe that relates to [what I said earlier about how it feels like] a staircase to nowhere. It's such a big challenge to get audience members to come to independent theatre. How to attract audiences, supporters, make it something that people have a habit of doing*

*I'm constantly told I'm too ambitious. It's disheartening for me to hear. You should be able to believe in capacity of people's abilities. It's ok for people to be ambitious, and to be public (confident) in the striving for that.*

*The problem is always funding. Always funding. We have a model where people don't expect to pay what the real costs are. Because if they did, prices would be completely unaffordable. We're sort of in a position where we have to make theatre for cheap ticket prices. and that's really really hard to do.*

### **Scaling up**

*I think that the longer the institution is around, and the institutions in Canada are quite young, the more likely it is to be entrenched. That it finds ways of doing things and patterns of doing things that kind of are similar from year to year. So every year there's going to be this, and every year there's going to be this program. [...] We've adopted patterns and systems of doing things that are difficult to change and so that when we are asking for new and ideas and young people to come in and rethink the way institutions work, or rethink the way, that they're coming into the structures as opposed to coming in just changing them and bringing new people in.*

*We don't talk to one another. We don't engage with each other artistically as much as we should. We don't engage with each other artistically for the sake of artistic exchange. We do it to make things cheaper. I think that we could achieve the same results if we were engaging with one another for artistic purposes. Things would also be cheaper. But the focus of work would be different, output would be different... I think that would solve some of the artistic diversity issue as well... We have a great sense of community but those communities don't talk to one another. We do small community well. Large community, badly.*

*There are a lot of artists not getting paid. A lot are emerging artists. It takes a long time to find audiences and sell tickets. But the mid-level that we're part of, the mid-range indie scene, it's really incredible to be able to pay artists to do what they love for a living. But then of course there are massive theatres that are charging exorbitant ticket fees and they feel so out of touch from us. I would say that's where a lot of the community is broken.*

## HOPE

While the frustrations shared in the preceding pages are significant, what this report identifies is that all 29 interviewees expressed tangible hope. From observing ingenuity, watching peers hustle, hearing conversations change, to feeling the community supports them, seeing ‘channels’ or pathways being created or already existing for them to move through, and sensing one’s own power or agency, interviewees expressed hope for the future.

*People are doing brilliant things with the small small amounts of money. I applaud them, and learn from them. That’s what we as theatre artists do. We spin straw into gold. [...] Even though the pool is getting smaller in terms of operating funding and so on — I see theatre companies who have figured it out. Even if it means doing shows with 1 or 2 people in it and touring them all over the world. They’ve figured out. [...] Ingenuity can’t stop outside the creation studio, it has to continue in the administrative aspect as well. There are theatre companies that are making it work. I think they’re incredible. We have to keep learning from the people who are pushing the boundaries and making it happen.*

*I think a lot [in the Toronto theatre sector] is working. I think part of it is that energy and drive to create your own thing if you don’t see it. And so you have a lot of people in the arts who have created a thing that wasn’t there before. It has led to a perhaps oversaturation of things that weren’t there before. But that’s not necessarily a bad thing. I think we do a lot of things well. I think there’s a type of Toronto show that its residents know how to make, and that pleases audiences.*

*I do think [this] is a time that we’re in [where] at least some of these conversations are more open and being able to be brought forward. That has had an effect. That is working. And more conversations about interdisciplinary works is great, I think more and more companies are starting to open their eyes to ways of creation and methodology and not only be doing text-based works, or dance work, but more conversation.*

*Coming from Nova Scotia, what I love here, and gives people hope, allows for a healthy community, is that there’s a sense of bigger*

*organizations creating opportunities for smaller organizations. There’s a tiering system. [There are all these] initiatives trying to create channels for young companies to come up. In Halifax there was not nearly enough of that. [...] This is why I’m here. It gives me hope, the possibility of having a career here.*

*The community itself is great. The community is incredibly supportive. I know that because I moved here in the 1990s. I came from out west — I didn’t know anyone. I just knocked on doors, said I was a young artist and wanted to work, and everyone — from big to small theatres — people met with me and started talking with me. I’ve continued this: I meet with anyone who calls me; I try to follow their progress. I try to work with them whenever I can. I’ve noticed that about RISER. It’s a complete embodiment of that idea. That’s also one of the great bonuses of this theatre community. It’s full of people who actually want to collaborate, not everyone trying to carve out their own thing and keep to themselves. That’s my experience of it. I find it very welcoming and open. It’s a tradition I try to carry on.*

*I think we have a lot more power than we admit that we do.*

What gives hope, too, are initiatives like Generator and The RISER Project. Sector development initiatives like these are run by upstart, creative, savvy, flexible, hustle-oriented people who work quickly, want to listen, want to learn, want to improve, want to shift the sector towards better, want time off and better ‘work/work/life’ balance, and can and do deliver using disruptive methods and mindsets.<sup>9</sup>

Asked to give their thoughts on Generator’s APT program, one participant summarized:

*It was a great experience. Exactly what I hoped it would be. A lot of really good information, really good tools, the organizational tools were really helpful. A lot of notes were aggregated so that people who were good at taking notes could share. The instructors were great as was meeting them in person, because emailing those people now is no longer a cold call. That’s actually a huge resource. Just getting to be in a*

9 Work/work/life balance is a reference to how Generator describes the reality of most artists’ lives: One does some work to live and other work that one loves.



*room with those people. Having them remember your face and name. Theatre is about networking to a kind of insane extent so that was very valuable.*

Regarding The RISER Project, one participant shared:

*I hope that the model encourages other people to build on similar models. I think that it's worth more than a lot of other models or things that are going on, that companies are doing in this city and this province. It's exciting. It's very different. It's free, risk is encouraged, nobody else's hands are getting in your work. It's so unique that I feel the potential for the shows to be really special is very high, versus anything else I've seen. And I hope it continues that way.*

Also speaking to The RISER Project, a senior partner observed:

*The beauty of RISER is that it goes to a bunch of companies*

*and asks what can you offer. Then you offer and they “voltron” it together.<sup>10</sup> The issue that that solves for young producers, that everybody who started these companies know, is that [...] you are this one entity that has to find space, find money, find not just rehearsal or venue space but admin space. Just finding a photocopier that isn't going to break the bank is difficult sometimes. Access to all the things that are necessary is really prohibitive to people who don't have that access. By piecemealing it together from a number of sources where everybody is bringing a different piece of the puzzle in, that makes a lot of sense. It really helps the artists and the young producers. It increases their capacity. It goes a lot deeper than just ‘oh that's a great weight off my shoulders.’ It's more far reaching than that. The fact that they have a space that — what we offer is our rehearsal studio — the fact that they have a space they can go into every day and leave their stuff in — that is not a work room that's being repurposed, or whatever shitty space they can afford, it's a fairly good space, that increases their artistic output, that enriches their artistic product... It's not just a weight off their administrative shoulders. It is artistically enriching*

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<sup>10</sup> Voltron: Defender of the Universe is an 80s American animated television series adapted from two different Japanese anime series about a team of five (!) astronauts who pilot individual robot lions that can be combined to form a super robot to fight off mega enemies. In the second season, a new, mightier Voltron is constructed; this time consisting of fifteen members (Wikipedia). ‘Modularity’ seems an interesting strategy or tactic to consider. Is this characteristic of contemporary solutions?

## BEYOND THE CASE STUDIES

How can funders and innovative ventures like Generator and The RISER Project set ambitious measurable goals while simultaneously offering project staff and participants *more* freedom?

It is often said in business and technology circles that innovation requires failure. If this is true, how many projects really receive a failing grade from the project initiators or from funders? Anecdotally, according to funders and fundees, final reports are often submitted to funders without enough transparency or complexity to rapidly or profoundly advance knowledge and insight. Is the arts sector “failing at failing” (or failing to be radically honest), and does this mean we are failing at innovation and progress?

Without measurable (or without measuring) failure, how do we know that the risk and innovation implied are real, right or bold enough? A project may turn out OK — say it merits a “B” grade in terms of accomplishments. Within that average level of accomplishment or success however, how much room was the project given to fail? Suppose a radical innovation fund mandated for ambitious experiments asked funded projects to identify how they plan to risk failure, and why in these areas or ways? How would this expectation enable an *unusual* kind of risk-taking and potentially result in more desirable outcomes?<sup>11</sup>

Typically, the key question asked of either case study might be expressed in terms of how focused or diffuse, deep or distributed, ambitious or cooperative these developers want their work to become. To what extent, for example, might The RISER Project focus on tours and remounts for participating artists as key performance indicators? To what extent might Generator produce efficiencies or more targeted ambitions in their training and residency programs by building up the new norms — by popularizing a new typology of career paths

and the stages of development for independent companies? Is it possible to be focused *and* diffuse, deep *and* distributed, ambitious *and* inclusive *and* cooperative? What kind of innovation can each venture focus on optimizing?

How might the arts concede *and* contradict the prevailing values and framing beliefs of technology-led business innovation?

### Theorizing hopefully

To measure progress and ambition, to be able to set goals *and* offer more freedom, this paper proposes hope.

Hope is not shallow or simplistic. Hope is complex, energetic and life-sustaining.<sup>12</sup>

Far from flimsy or unreliable, it is reasonable to believe that a rubric on hope can be a responsible metric. Hope is a resonant, multifaceted emotion and concept that relates to many other factors for success or progress. Hope is discernible. Artists are typically highly-educated, trained as critical thinkers, and not rich. The new norm among independent artists is to also possess an unusual degree of business savvy, or to be hustle-oriented. Simply put, artists are too smart, too entrepreneurial, too much a ‘hustler’ themselves, and too financially conscious to blithely put up with frustrating, hopeless solutions.

Rather than focusing strictly on identified actions and measuring how well those actions were carried out, assessing ventures like Generator and The RISER Project based on hope would mean staff could be left free to invent and iterate solutions for an evolving context. Speaking to the values that guide their company’s work, one interviewee shared three questions:

1. What can theatre be?
2. How can we be more generous?
3. How do we honour the value in being inconsistent?

<sup>11</sup> It would also be important to ask how the risk of failure is a product of real unknowns or productive uncertainties, as opposed to willful poor planning or lack of research.

<sup>12</sup> Studies show that Hope’s inverse, hopelessness, is a strong predictor for suicide (Klonsky et al 2012, Britton et al 2008, Beck et al 1985).

All three questions point outward, expansively. The value of being “inconsistent” was echoed in other interviews. Being creative and innovative runs counter to being consistent and focused inward. To produce new alternatives and better ideas, it does not make sense to keep doing what has already been done, to look only at what is already inside the situation. New, innovative, disruptive models are difficult to evaluate because these models are continuously adapting, iterating, responding to the context, and absorbing outside influence. This inconsistency, this fluidity, is an asset. Assessing innovation by its measurable contribution to hope leaves room, preserves freedom for people in the situation to determine what are the best ways to act, respond and do what needs doing.

With some development, ‘return on hope’ could become a flexible rubric applicable to other sectors interested in tracking the value of their work. If return on investment (ROI) measures the economic value of a venture, perhaps return on hope (ROH) measures its human, social, creative or transformative

value. Over the long term, nurturing hope requires investment in all aspects of the human condition — from basic to financial to self-actualization and meaning-making needs. From an appreciative inquiry perspective, hope is an enlivening, muscular force for transformation:

*Hope is not quiet and passive, or reserved for the comfortable middle-class or privileged elite, living alone in the forest. Hope is grounded in resilience [...] We take the position that we live at a time when collective hope is required in our culture [...] Braidotti (2013) asserts, “Hope is a way of dreaming up possible futures: an anticipatory virtue that permeates our lives and activates them. It is a powerful motivating force grounded... in projects that aim at reconstructing the social imaginary.”*

(Lewis and Winkelman 2016)

Indexed over time, does hope in the Toronto theatre sector trend up or down? Rather than focus on frustrations, what might change, and how, if sector development efforts shifted toward actions that can produce exponential gains on Hope?





## CONCLUDING NOTE

It is the year 2017, and it is, frankly, an exciting time to be in Toronto theatre.

This paper looks at the values underlying two bold new change initiatives emerging from the Toronto theatre sector. How are Generator and The RISER Project similar? What are some underlying values, beliefs or attitudes that connect the two case studies? As well, with change initiatives like these, which are by necessity, responsive, iterative, fluid, evolving, not fixed, how should or how can innovation be assessed?

This study is by no means definitive. It is intended to be suggestive — to point to areas for further study. By framing the field of inquiry and pointing to the broader applicability of this work, it is hoped that more interest in research will follow.

*Canada is a young country with young people. You feel the possibility. You feel as an individual, “I could feel like maybe I could change the cultural landscape of my city.” And then, with [something like this] — well look — they are! These pockets of ambitious people who are breaking the mold, making new models. It just takes someone with a great idea and a lot of work. I mean, I’m sure it took a lot of convincing, and then the brilliance for someone in government to go, “OK.”*

As exploratory research, this paper offers few answers and offers, instead, many questions. Two case studies have been formulated to consider sectoral issues and opportunities using a combination of critical lenses. Some key, useful strategies are identified in the case studies, including acceleration, immersion, coaching, co-residencies, culture and collectivity. The research also points to a new genre of arts leaders, suggesting fulfillment lies in developing networks, having challenging conversations, widely sharing access and resources, approaching uncertainty with a start-up attitude, and not shying away from taking on aspects of ‘the hustler’ persona to manage the work/work/life balance. Finally, hope is proposed as the basis of a new rubric for assessing the value of actions and ventures aimed at shifting systems or transforming stagnant realities.

The call to action here is for more preoccupation with developing and supporting actions that build hope sustainably.

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## APPENDIX II: DETAILED METHOD AND TIMELINE

The research was undertaken as a ten-week process spread over roughly ten months.

**January – March 2017:** The process began with a review of literature and extant data from ‘stage one’ of the research study, followed by the proposition of a revised research plan that was accepted by both Foundations.

**March – April 2017:** Subsequently, the study began with two group mapping exercises that lasted roughly 2.5 to 3 hours each: The staff of Generator and The RISER Project worked in two separate groups to draw a “giga map” (high resolution, information-dense, high complexity information sketches) to tell the story of their venture, from a starting point of their own choosing to current day.<sup>13</sup> “Mappers” were encouraged to aim for a minimum 1000 data points (an arbitrarily high number to challenge people to reach for or beyond their limits) and to label relationships between events, entities, and insights, to encourage as much complexity as possible to be recorded or represented in some way on this map (Sevaldson 2011). Cue cards with information, phrases, themes or questions culled from the preliminary data were given to the “mappers” to decide if they would incorporate, address, or discard.

**May – July 2017:** Data from the group mapping exercises, i.e. photos of details (sections) from the ‘giga map’, was used as part of the inquiry process in subsequent interviews with staff. These six staff interviews were partly open-ended and partly scripted; each lasted two to three hours. Another ten interviews with companies that had been involved with either venture were conducted by telephone; each lasted roughly 30 to 60 minutes, depending on their level of involvement and availability for an interview. These interviews were loosely scripted.

**July – October 2017:** All interviews were transcribed.

The transcripts were coded by colour and analyzed for an initial sense of keywords, categories and themes. Another seven interviews were completed and transcribed over 5 weeks to incorporate a greater range of perspectives and to test and develop topics and themes. All interviews were re-coded for relevance to the research questions and analyzed for insights on specific topics. Altogether, the twenty-nine interviews produced well over 500 relevant excerpts to code, analyze and interpret. The process was recursive, overlapping and iterative, meaning it was less tidy as an experience than this account suggests.

**August – September 2017:** During this time, participants in Generator’s training program were asked to complete the final survey from the previous consultant’s evaluation process, so as to complete the two-year evaluation data collection process for the program. This data, along with applicant and jury data from The RISER Project’s selection process, was analyzed for program-level assessments for the two ventures. Graphs of that data are included in Appendix IV: Quantitative analysis.

Finally, relevant literature was reviewed throughout the research process, primarily scholarly articles, some articles published in the mainstream media, and reports published by industry knowledge centres (e.g. Centre for Digital Entrepreneurship and Economic Performance). Keywords included: *social innovation, systems change, cultural start-ups, Canadian or successful accelerators and incubators, arts entrepreneurship, employment for arts graduates, independent theatre producing in Toronto and Canada*

Drafts of the research paper were shared with staff of Toronto Arts Foundation, the Metcalf Foundation, and the two venture organizations with an invitation to provide factual corrections and suggestions on clarity (October 2017). All manner of feedback was offered and welcomed, however final decisions concerning interpretation or analysis rested with the researcher.

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<sup>13</sup> All staff members from both Generator and Why Not Theatre (which produces The RISER Project) participated in this exercise: from Generator, Michael Wheeler (outgoing Executive Director), Kristina Lemieux (incoming Executive Director), Katie Leamen (Director of Coordination and Communications); and from Why Not Theatre, Ravi Jain (Artistic Director), Owais Lightwala (Managing Director), Kelly Read (Executive Producer).

## APPENDIX III: MORE ON METHODOLOGY

The research design employed a qualitative-interpretive, systems thinking-informed, appreciative inquiry-derived, partly arts-led (inter-arts-led) approach.

I always think it funny that people who know me as an artist, who know that I describe my practice as interdisciplinary – which for me means atypical, quixotic, slipping into the gaps and edges of disciplines with protocols and intentions from other practices, mixing strategies, criteria, preoccupations and disciplines, but not *quite* a-discipline; for I am not discipline-agnostic nor anti-discipline, because I am *for* rigour; except if you think of ‘anti-discipline’ as being another kind of discipline, practice or approach, in which case, I bring anti-discipline into my practice too, because without a kind of wildness or undisciplined quality the work lacks *vigour*, does not come *alive* – it’s funny that people might know this about me as an artist and then expect I would be any different when it comes to research.

I cannot admit to faithfulness to one method nor methodology. I do not subscribe strictly to Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis or constructivist theory. I am not a positivist but I do believe in gravity and will make use of a ‘fact’ every now and again.

The world is complex, and as of yet, still unknowable. Imposing an orderly frame around phenomena is just a way of arranging and reducing the complexity for humans. The world is not *actually* constructed the way any one method describes, or how any one methodology understands it. Organizing information is always a process of leaving some out. Methodology is about one’s beliefs about knowledge. I am not fully committed.

My methodology involves art. I am an interdisciplinary artist-researcher. My practices are hybrid.

**Qualitative data analysis** is the rigorous (methodical) process of selecting and separating out information, i.e. raw data, articulating the meaning of that information, then analyzing the meaning or insight observed. The goal is to describe, explain and/or interpret patterns and relationships. The process

is repeated over and over again, and can be iterative, meaning the process can be changed based upon the interim outcomes. Qualitative analysis is often discovery-oriented.

**Interpretive research** privileges local, situated knowledge and situated learners. It is a ‘bottom-up’ approach to concept development (theory building, knowledge creation) that does not assume “blind acceptance by researchers of what they are told” (Shwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). An interpretive researcher does not believe that “facts” about a situation are out there in the world waiting to be discovered or uncovered in the same way that people assume the laws of physics can be observed or theorems in math can be derived.

*A researcher can interview based on the belief that she is going to be able to establish “what really happened” in a setting [...] Or a researcher can interview based on the belief that there are multiple perceived and/or experienced social “realities” concerning what happened, rather than a singular “truth.”*

(Shwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012)

**Systems thinking** is the theory and practice of examining the links and interactions between components of systems. Systems thinking theorizes that there are leverage points in systems, places where “a small change could lead to a large shift” in the behaviour of the system. Which way to push a lever for the desired effect(s) is believed to be counterintuitive (Meadows 2008).

**Systems-oriented design** is a practice of systems thinking developed from within design practice. It uses a design approach to deal with super complexity. Giga mapping is a visualization tool within systems-oriented design that increases one’s capacity for dealing with super complexity. Giga mapping investigates relationships across multiple layers and scales, enabling designers to critically examine how systems are conceived and framed (Sevaldson 2011).

**Appreciative Inquiry** views social systems as socially constructed phenomena that can be

changed through *purposeful re-imagination*, and conscious choices by the people that populate it. The life of communities is believed to be expressed in the stories that people tell each other every day. In other words, the life of a community is constantly being co-authored by its people. As such, words and topics are carefully chosen from the stories being told by the community for their poetic possibilities — for the emotions, values and meaning they invoke. Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to constructing or foregrounding change stories using language that enliven and inspire the best in people. Appreciative inquiry is a systematic process of asking questions designed to positively reinforce or draw out a system's capacity to re-conceptualize and to self-generate solutions and answers. (Watkins and Mohr 2001).

Essentially, the research approach employed here is discovery-oriented, works through the case studies to look at the bigger picture, and aims to construct a way forward based on what the people inside the system say is working. Other perspectives inform the analysis, for example business and systems thinking, to critically think about the situation at hand.

### **Arts-informed from tip to body to tail**

An arts mindset has been consciously incorporated into the data collection, analysis and synthesis processes, making a small contribution to the expanding body of arts-informed research and creative evaluation methods.<sup>14</sup>

Elements of this researcher's (professional) interdisciplinary arts practice were made into

integral parts of the research design, such as:

- Questions and techniques that I use as a scenographer (theatre designer) and artist to uncover what needs to be understood, revealed, highlighted, developed or expressed.
- Methods, tactics and instincts I have developed or learned to use as an artist to construct situations and settings that produce an open downloading of critical and deep information, intuitions and images (content, aspirations and ideas) from the people I am working with, be they subjects or collaborators.
- Sensemaking and devising strategies I use to frame, fit, distill, organize, connect and reconceptualize messy (complex) information, motivations, goals, desires, visions, questions, emotions, financial and physical constraints into compact, portable, suggestive or generative (poetic) ideas that can be read, experienced repeated or re-situated.

In a society increasingly dominated by economics, algorithms and Big Data mindsets, *what does art know?* And *how* does this matter? It is hoped that this interdisciplinary arts-informed approach to knowledge building presents images, concepts and ideas apt for understanding and assessing human and cultural activity.

Bringing the arts mindset into the foreground of research is about trying to model the way we wish for humanity to see and understand itself — a thoughtfully inclusive arts-informed inquiry.

<sup>14</sup> It might be noted that most published arts-based research seems to use artistic methods for data collection and/or communicating the results of the data. Analysis tends to proceed through content and thematic analysis (Boydell et al 2012). Discussion of how artistic methods might be used in other parts of the research process (framing, coding, analysis, sense-making) seems to be lacking. It is hoped that this section on methodology begins to add a refreshing perspective on what arts-based research can be, and/or how it can be described.



## APPENDIX IV: SURVEY RESPONSES TO GENERATOR'S ARTIST PRODUCER TRAINING PROGRAM

These 'river diagrams' visualize responses to end-of-program survey questions posed to Generator's APT program graduates. To date, there have been seven graduates out of nine students in 2015/2016, and ten graduates out of ten students in 2016/2017. Seven responses were received from each graduating class. The medium purple colour shows the minimum and maximum values entered by APT participants in response to each question. The convention with 'river diagrams' is to look for the areas showing the greatest difference between minimum and maximum values. Also plotted is the average response to each question, marked in a dark purple line.

- Looking at the areas where the greatest difference lies between minimum and maximum values, would the range of responses suggest the program is too challenging or not challenging enough?
- What other questions could be asked?
- How might some questions be refined or modified for more clarity? E.g. "The pace of the class was appropriate" might be reworded to read "The pace of the class was too fast." This rewording might produce more consensus and clarity (strongly agree or strongly disagree).

APT Participant End-of-Program Evaluation - 2016



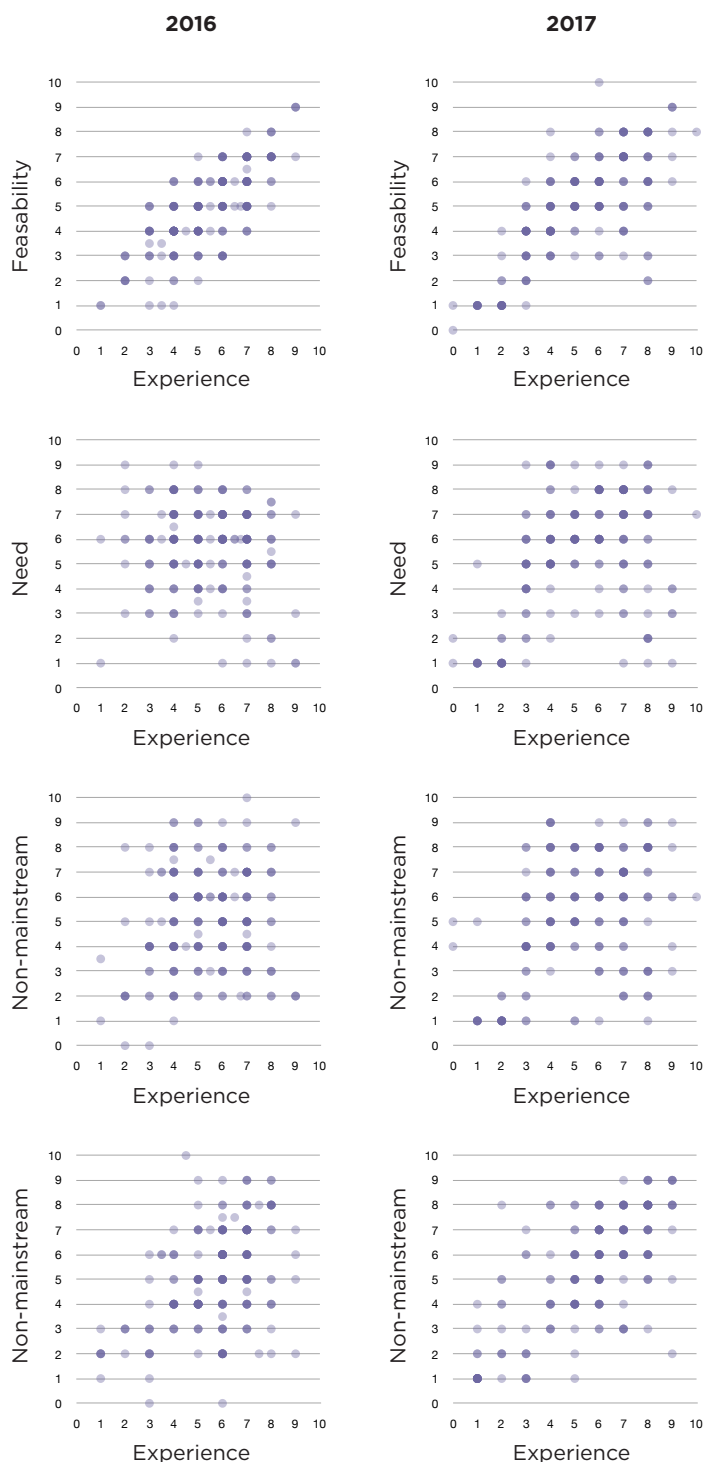
APT Participant End-of-Program Evaluation - 2017



## APPENDIX V: JURY SCORES FOR APPLICATIONS TO THE RISER PROJECT

These scatter-plot graphs visualize the scores assigned by jurors for applications to The RISER Project. The graphs use transparent dots; the darker the dot, the more often that score appeared in the aggregate. These graphs show all the scores given by all four jurors for all applications adjudicated in 2016 and 2017. Jurors were asked to assess applications based on “need, experience, feasibility and diversity.” The criterion of “diversity” was used by jurors as a category that encompasses diversity of practice (e.g. art forms, non-text-based creation processes) and diversity of under-represented perspectives (e.g. Indigenous, culturally diverse, queer, women, accessibility). For clarity, the criterion of “diversity” has been replaced here with the label “non-mainstream.”

- Is the process bringing in the desired or expected applicants?
- If The RISER Project is achieving its objectives, how should the shape of these graphs change over time?
- What and how might other factors affect the shape of these graphs over time?
- Will these four factors (need, experience, feasibility, non-mainstream) continue to be the key factors used to assess applications?





## RESEARCHER

Helen Yung is an interdisciplinary artist-researcher with the Culture of Cities Centre. Over the past two years she has been involved as an advisory committee member with the Ontario Nonprofit Network's development of a sector-wide evaluation strategy. Past and current research and consulting clients include: Toronto Arts Foundation, The Theatre Centre, Metcalf Foundation, Canadian Public Arts Funders, Canada Council for the Arts, Canadian Arts Coalition, Culture Days (national office), Cultural Pluralism in the Arts Movement Ontario (CPAMO), Professional Association of Canadian Theatres, Canadian Dance Assembly, Pixel Gallery, FITC Design & Technology Festivals, and others. Helen is a 2017 Salzburg Global Seminar Fellow. She serves on the Board of Directors for the Centre for Social Innovation's charitable foundation and as Co-Chair of the foundation's fundraising committee.

As an artist, Helen has been presented, programmed, invited to speak, invited to research and/or create in Montreal, New York, Syros (Greece), Buenos Aires, Banff, Charleville-Mezières (France), Marnay-sur-Seine (France), Sydney and in the bush of New South Wales (Australia). She designs installations and environments, and creates socially-engaged interactions and interventions.

Helen has published with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, CPAMO, The Dance Current, and Ricepaper Magazine. Her latest piece on "Networks and Polyamory" will be published by the McConnell Foundation as part of a report on the proceedings

of an international retreat on the network mindset. She has given talks at conferences convened by the International Association for the Study of the Culture of Cities (2016, 2014 & 2013), American Comparative Literature Association (2013), Ontario Museums Association (2010), Magnetic North Theatre Festival (2010), University of Toronto's Teaching & Learning Outside The Classroom Initiative (2008), and University of Toronto's Graduate Centre for Drama (2006). [www.helenyung.com](http://www.helenyung.com)

### The Culture of Cities Centre

The Culture of Cities Centre is an urban centre for the study of culture and the city. Its primary function is to engage an international public through book series, journals, research projects and conferences. Our publications, workshops and special events are devoted to new ways of representing, shaping and defining urban culture. The Centre's character is at once public and private, reflective and engaged, but always oriented to the very social order that it seeks to elucidate. The International Association for the Study of the Culture of Cities is an international and interdisciplinary forum convened by the Culture of Cities Centre, for colleagues who share intellectual interests in developing innovative approaches to interpretive arts, methods, strategies and programs of inquiry for representing qualitative vectors of urban life. [www.cultureofcities.com](http://www.cultureofcities.com)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS – RESEARCHER

The researcher would like to thank the interviewees for their candour and for making time, and the staff of both ventures for the same reasons and for their courage to open themselves up to be “studied”, then living with the mystery of not knowing what would be the outcomes. While reality is multiple, and interpretation sometimes a process of making strange, I hope you all see something of your experience represented in this report.

Many thanks to Toronto Arts Foundation and The Metcalf Foundation for commissioning this research and committing to an arts-minded discovery process. Sincere thanks to Michael Trent, Director of the Performing Arts Program, and Anne Perdue, Senior Editor at The Metcalf Foundation for their thoughtful advice and questions. Deepest gratitude to Margo Charlton, Research and Impact Manager at Toronto Arts Council and Toronto Arts Foundation who deftly shepherded this process with intelligence, grace, warmth and curiosity. Her understanding of and interest in research and knowledge building held open a unique space for inquiry.

Some colleagues played key roles (an ear, an eye, a beating heart) at different points in the writing process; many thanks to Alex Thalheim-Martin, Ted Witzel and Dr. Elke Grenzer for sitting with me in this. And finally, thank you to my partner Tom Kuo for thinking what I do matters.

### **Individuals interviewed:**

Natalie Ackers, Necessary Angel Theatre  
Vikki Anderson, Theatrefront  
Maddie Bautista  
Franco Boni, The Theatre Centre  
Ishai Buchbinder  
Naomi Campbell, Luminato  
Marjorie Chan, Cahoots Theatre  
Ravi Jain, Why Not Theatre  
Sebastien Heins, Outside the March  
Rose Hopkins  
Daniel Karasik  
Shaista Latif  
Katie Leamen, Generator  
Kristina Lemieux, Generator  
Shira Leuchter, Unspun Theatre  
Owais Lightwala, Why Not Theatre  
Darwin Lyons  
Matthew Mackenzie  
Justin Miller  
Amy Nostbakken  
Jiv Parasram  
Kelly Read, Why Not Theatre  
Kaitlyn Riordan, Shakespeare in the Ruff  
Kelly Thornton, Nightwood Theatre  
Matthew Thomas Walker, Litmus Theatre  
Dan Watson, Ahuri Theatre  
Michael Wheeler, formerly of Generator  
Kevin Matthew Wong  
David Yee, Fu-GEN Theatre

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS – TORONTO ARTS FOUNDATION

Collaboration runs throughout this project. Thanks to Metcalf Foundation's CEO Sandy Houston and Toronto Arts Foundation and Toronto Arts Council's CEO Claire Hopkinson, for getting the conversation started.

Grateful appreciation to Michael Trent, Director of Performing Arts, and Anne Purdue, Lead Editor, in the realization of this research project, and Ali Houston, Metcalf Intern, for her support of the community event on October 27, 2017.

We also would like to recognize the generosity of Generator and The RISER Project for agreeing to be part of this project, for their determination, their willingness to risk and for having a vision of how things can be different.

The first stage of the research, carried out in 2015/16 under the project title "Means of Production," was conducted by Sherri Helwig of S.L. Helwig & Associates.

The second stage of the research commenced in 2017. Many kudos to Helen Yung of Culture of Cities Centre for steering the second stage, reframing questions, connecting the work to larger trends, and delivering a report that ends with a call for hope.

Toronto Arts Foundation and Toronto Arts Council staff who provided solid support along the way include: Deputy Director Susan Wright, Director of Philanthropy and Programs Jennifer Green, Community Engagement Manager Jaclyn Rodrigues, Communications Manager Sarah Gladki, and Office Manager Michelle Parson.

## PHOTO CREDITS

Inside cover & pages 5, 7, 22, 25, and 45 (Sherri L. Helwig)

Pages 2, 3, 10 and 31 (Helen Yung)

Pages 4 and 11 (Generator)

Page 15 (shows as part of The RISER Project)

Graphs in Appendix IV and V (Alex Thalheim-Martin )



## RESEARCH COLLABORATORS AND CASE STUDIES

This report was commissioned by Toronto Arts Foundation with the support of the Metcalf Foundation and Toronto Arts Council.

### About Toronto Arts Foundation

Toronto Arts Foundation is a charitable organization that sparks creative connections, spotlights artistic excellence, and supports vibrant cultural growth throughout our diverse city, through private sector investment. To learn more or to make a donation, visit [www.torontoartsfoundation.org](http://www.torontoartsfoundation.org).

### About Toronto Arts Council

Toronto Arts Council (TAC) is the City of Toronto's funding body for artists and arts organizations. Since 1974, TAC has played a major role in the city's cultural industries by supporting a very broad range of artistic activity. From the emerging artist to the most established, from celebrated institutions to arts that challenge convention, TAC is typically the first funder to offer support. Today, TAC grants lead to exhibitions, performances, readings and workshops seen annually by over 9.5 million people. Through its ongoing funding of over \$18 million annually, TAC cultivates a rich engagement between artists and audiences. It is proud to reflect Toronto's vibrancy through the diversity of the artists, arts communities and audiences that it serves. [www.torontoartscouncil.org](http://www.torontoartscouncil.org)

### About Metcalf Foundation

The George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation's mission is to enhance the effectiveness of people and organizations working together to help Canadians imagine and build a just, healthy, and creative society.

The Foundation focuses its efforts on three areas: improving economic livelihoods for low-income people in Toronto; building a low-carbon, resource efficient, and resilient Canada; and leveraging opportunities for new approaches and shared learning in the performing arts. The Foundation's work is grounded in the belief that change happens when we share hopeful visions of the future, work and learn collectively, think broadly in pursuit of comprehensive

solutions, and take a meaningful role in the decisions that affect our lives. [www.metcalffoundation.com](http://www.metcalffoundation.com)

### About Generator

Generator is a mentoring, teaching, and innovation incubator for independent artists, producers and leaders; created and run by artists for artists. From intensive programs to workshops, Generator is transforming the role of the artist producer one artist at a time.

We increase the competencies of independent live performance artists by sharing the tools to create, produce, and be paid for their work. To create within the limited resources that independent artists do, the best resource they can afford is themselves. Controlling their own means of production enables artists' greater agency in their careers as well as innovation and viability within the industry. As the core of this model is a belief that learning is lateral and creative, we promote knowledge-sharing and cross-company/cross-artist collaboration to mentor artists in finding and adapting the tools to produce, manage and plan for themselves in a way that enhances their creative process and product. [www.generator.to](http://www.generator.to)

### About Why Not Theatre

Why Not Theatre is an agile, international theatre company based in Toronto, Canada, rooted in the values of innovation, community and collaboration. Our work is inventive, cross-cultural, and reflects our passion for the exploration of difference. We challenge the status quo by examining what stories are being told and who is telling them. More than just a theatre company, we develop creative strategies to build a healthier and stronger arts ecology. We MAKE and tour critically-acclaimed and award-winning new work, SHARE resources with other companies and artists to produce and tour their work, and PROVOKE change through new producing models and the presentation of work for new audiences. We are led by a core team of Founding Artistic Director Ravi Jain, Managing Director Owais Lightwala, Executive Producer Kelly Read and Associate Producer Sandra Henderson. [www.theatrewhyshot.org](http://www.theatrewhyshot.org)



Generator and The Riser Project: Sector developers for independent theatre in Toronto: November 2017.

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