

MARCH 2022



PRO XIM ITY LAB

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROXIMITY LAB: imagining the future of verbatim theatre

A one-off magazine by Project: Humanity

02

To whom it may
concern

04

The world that
inspired the Lab's
inception

07

How the Lab was both
space and community

13

Care in practice

18

Let's break down
verbatim

23

The survey that never
was. Or was it?

27

Is there (theatre) life
out there?

33

Experimentation!

37

What we can't
unlearn

I-V

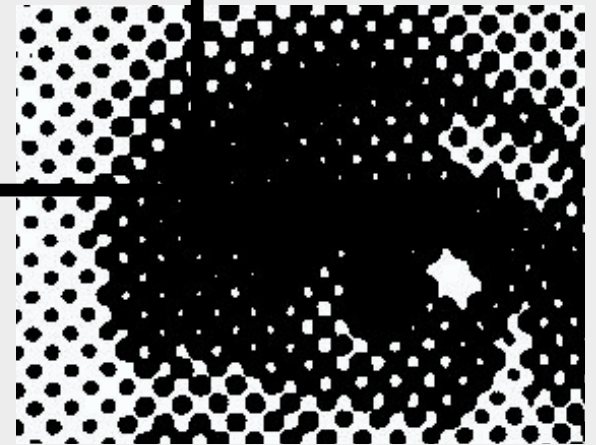
Appendix

02	Prologue
04	The Context
07	Who is Proximity Lab?
13	The Contract of Care
18	Verbatim unpacked
23	The journey of a survey
27	Roundtables
33	Lab études
37	Conclusions/Epilogue
i-v	Appendix

MARCH 2022

projecthumanity.ca

PROLOGUE



To whom it may concern,

At the very first meeting of the Proximity Lab, we co-created something I call the Contract of Care -- which is shared in full within the pages of this magazine-style report. Akin to a “room agreement” or “rules of engagement”, this framework constituted a first step around closing the distance between project participants sharing a virtual space in a pandemic era. Among its tenets:

“Let’s embrace the value and integrity of silences. Let’s privilege Wonder. It’s ok to not know.”

One of the intentions of the ensuing pages is to put you the reader (practitioner, theatre lover, student, teacher, future of verbatim theatre) into closer proximity to some of what a group of artist-researchers turned over, and discovered, in the particular summer of 2021.

This report is in no way comprehensive of 8 full weeks of inquiry, discussion and experimentation. It cannot convey the complete design of the Proximity Lab or its myriad and rhizomatic upshots (more on that concept to come). It cannot wholly capture the embodied experience of our meetings, debates, and collective musings. It likely won’t constitute an effective process manual beyond a map of questions (although a map of questions may be interesting). What is offered here are highlights; sparks to catch the imagination and perhaps induce some hopefulness in those making art (and research) in hard times. Above all, I hope it inspires some wonder in you, the reader, and provides some window onto how artist-researchers in our modest sphere capitalized on our sectoral upheaval, and uncovered new ways of connecting and creating. A drawing together in the face of those winds that so often disperse us.

Andrew Kushnir
Artistic Director of Project: Humanity
Director of Proximity Lab

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This magazine-style report has been co-authored by Andrew Kushnir and Lindsay Valve. Andrew is artistic director of the socially-engaged theatre company Project: Humanity and the director of the Proximity Lab. Lindsay is the Lab's researcher-in-residence and, through her company Quilin, helped PH formalize the Lab's key research questions, collect data, and assess impacts.

The Proximity Lab's first iteration in the summer of 2021 was made possible through funding from the Ontario Arts Council's Arts Response Initiative.

Andrew and Lindsay wish to acknowledge those who have contributed to the Proximity Lab and therefore this report: Malia Rogers, Lisa Marie DiLiberto, Alex Bulmer, Tristan R. Whiston, Adam Chen, Chris Aldorf, Camille Turner, Danielle Bourgon, Daniel Chapman-Smith, Max Cameron-Fearon, Scott Emerson Moyle, Debashis Sinha, and especially Alten Wimot, Lucy Coren, Katey Wattam and Richard Lam.

Special recognition is due to Dr. Kathleen Gallagher who, along with providing Project: Humanity continuous insight into the work we're doing, brought Lindsay and Project: Humanity together. We also thank Rania El Mugammar and bcurrent Performing Arts, whose Anti-O workshops throughout 2020 and 2021 indelibly tuned our perceptions and aims.

THE CONTEXT

HOW THE LAB CAME TO BE

The Proximity Lab was conceived by Project: Humanity at the outset of 2021 as a way of looking at theatre and the world. And, also, as a way to stave off creative atrophy. We were rounding out the first year of the 'pandemic era', and had spent the whole of that time with most conventional theatre spaces shuttered. In Toronto, at least, there was very little by way of in-person gatherings between 'strangers and stories'. There was no vaccine or clear sense of when one would surface. We were in the midst of only the second wave of the virus.

By that point, we had collectively undergone various states of lockdown – shifting restrictions, levels of concern, degrees of understanding/frustration/resignation. Many artists were leaning on government assistance to tread water and pay rent. Others moved into other forms of paid work, adjacent to the theatre sector or well beyond it.

We had all undergone the summer of 2020 and its racial reckoning, catalyzed by the murder of George Floyd. This had its own consequential reverberations in the Canadian theatre world where inequities had persisted, unaddressed, unredressed. Companies across the country were taking a look in the mirror and, thanks to the persistent advocacy of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour artists, were beginning to grasp the problems in the reflection.

Concurrently, artists and companies (not all but most!) were moving into hitherto minimally-explored digital corners – us included. What did digital even mean when it came to theatre, liveness, gathering and 'sharing the same air'? Could it be anything more than a major concession? A connection gap had presented itself and many artists and audiences were working double to reach across it. There was growing fatigue and serious questions about the sustainability and effectiveness of these efforts. And yet, funding was emerging for this life-seeking mission. Stakeholders across the country were confronted with the big question: **if it can indeed exist, what does “pandemic-proof” theatre look like?**



Rehearsals for *Small Axe* (2015)



Zorana Sadiq in *Towards Youth* (2019)

What felt unmoored, specifically for Project: Humanity, was our decade-long practice of verbatim theatre – of assembling people in the dark to listen to the real words of others performed by actors. How could this journalistic form still be practiced in full and consequential ways? Consequential for its artists, but also for its publics. For our particular company, was this possible outside of a theatre space? And just as pressing: in such disorienting times, could we sustain an intimate relationship to the very art form that we'd devoted ourselves to as an organization?

Our survival instinct, as a company and as artists, was hyperactive. And alongside a sector doing the same, we asked ourselves: “what will audiences tolerate? What is worth their time and money? How can we make something that matters to us and others?” It didn't take us long to realize that these questions weren't altogether unfamiliar to us (albeit it hotter to the touch). Although gathering in the theatre was a full-swing habit for many Torontonians, that didn't mean it was always easy to draw people into our kind of work. PH started to ask itself “is producing plays something we will ever do again? Or will we be doing something different?”

Verbatim theatre has been perennially re-evaluated by us, as a company of artists. Its liabilities – be it appropriation of voice/authority, paternalism, its tilt

towards white saviour stories, its trading/treading on the suffering of marginalized groups and individuals – deeply inform PH's articulated values: to work in “right relationship” with artists and community collaborators, to create work that challenges and betters our democracy as opposed to reiterates and reaffirms its power imbalances, to challenge the notion of a central story to speak to by emphasizing that there is a multitude of stories to speak from. Verbatim theatre, at its best, has been about a plurality of perspectives. In an increasingly binary and polarized world, it's a form that troubles ‘this-or-that’ and reminds us of humanity's grey-scale. This ideal, however, is easier said than won.

What struck us anew in 2020 and 2021 were questions of accessibility and power. Were we sufficiently challenging a monoculture, the white gaze, a middle class sensibility? For work that aimed to improve democratic structures and inspire recalibration, were we doing enough to engage an authentically diverse community of makers and partakers? PH asked itself: can we invest differently in the form, those who practice it and those who attended the work? **What does 'taking better care' look like and require?** At a time when distancing measures were central to taking care of one another, how could we not only bridge the gap with theatrical experimentation but address other forms of disparity too.

*How can (re)new(ed)
forms of creativity be a
by-product of care?*



WHAT WHO IS PROXIMITY LAB?

ORIENTING QUESTION: WHO FELT CALLED
TO DO THIS WORK?

The Proximity Lab sought to trouble the binary between artists and researchers, and to centre learning over producing. The desired outcome was arriving at new information - including new feelings, new impulses - that could impact future practices. Surfacing the right question was going to be as meaningful a contribution as some "finding". This report reflects this ethos, where the reader will discover how questions (the sort one sits in) are the thing. And all of this work is the byproduct of assembling a group of artists that were compelled by riddles, above all.





To grasp the “what” of Proximity Lab is to consider the “who”. Following a public call for submissions, Project: Humanity selected four theatre makers in the spring of 2021 to join artistic director Andrew Kushnir and researcher Lindsay Valve for an 8 week intensive. In its open call, PH framed the Lab with the following imperative:

to imagine, discover, and test new “pandemic-proof”
methods of presenting Verbatim Theatre to
audiences while retaining the ethics of care,
compassion, and multiplicity of voice which are
central to our practices.

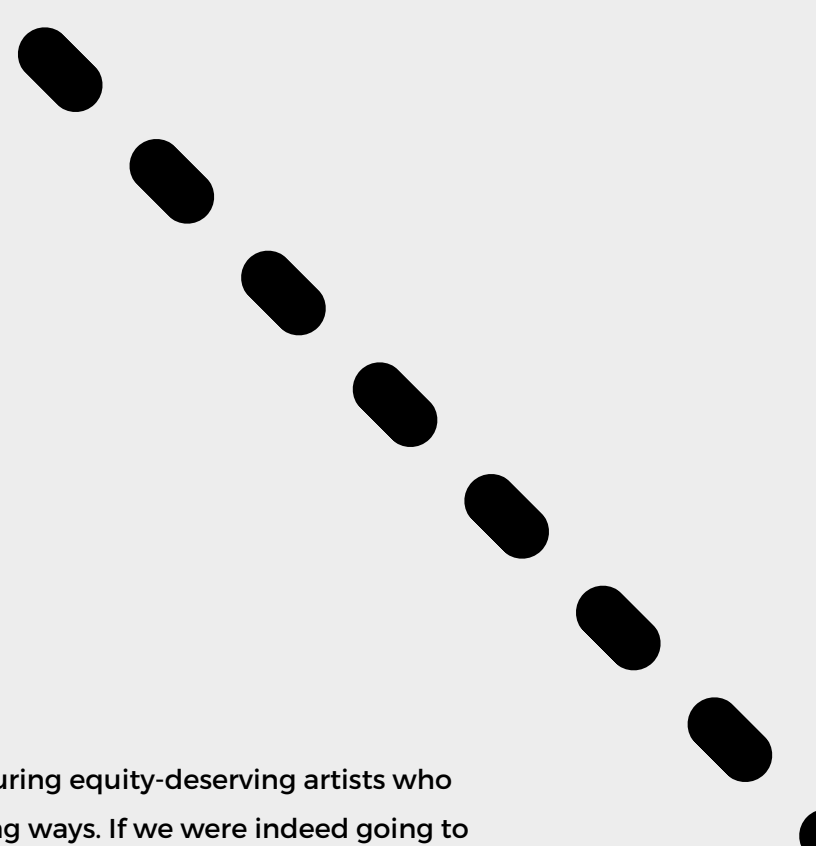
PH sought applicants who:

Have a ‘growth mindset’, are interested in
experimenting with form, and can detach from
traditional notions of success in pursuit of discovery
and creative risk-taking

Embracing an arguably anti-capitalist, anti-oppressive approach was something Project: Humanity could trace back in its arts practices (though not always), and was something that, alongside the Lab, the company wanted to more formally engender and broaden.

36 artists applied for one of four spots.





For the Lab, PH was committed to securing equity-deserving artists who were approaching their work in exciting ways. If we were indeed going to discuss and disrupt some of verbatim theatre's liabilities (most acutely as they pertained to power), it felt crucial to engage (and fund) a circle of artists that was primarily Black, Indigenous or People of Colour. We dreamed of a space where those who were most typically impacted by the failures of the form were among its co-appraisers and co-reformers. Embracing the imperative to "design for the margins", we contemplated what it means to carry out a redesign of verbatim through a coalition of white, white-passing, racialized and queer stakeholders. How do we collectively shift our proximity to the form's problems? And then how do we shift structures of colonialism, paternalism and white supremacy that we co-discover along the way? For PH, moving resources into equity-deserving thought leaders felt like a fitting step.

THE ARTIST- RESEARCHERS

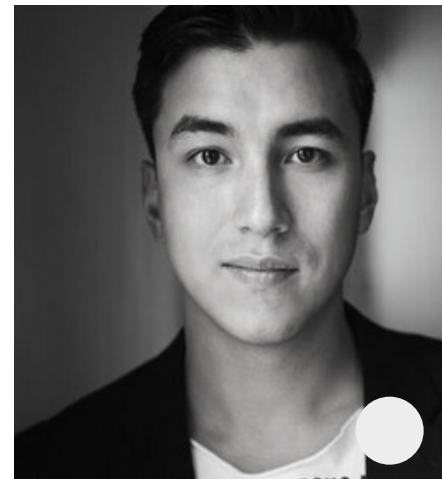


Alten Wilmot (he/them) is a multidisciplinary artist who focuses on contemporary dance. He is the founder of Unwrap Theatre as well as Voices Over Time – a troupe that provided free concerts for long-term care facilities. He is a 2020 recipient of a Buddies in Bad Times Queer Emerging Artist Award. Alten has also been a mentor in Project: Humanity's PH 1:1 program.

Katey Wattam (she/they) is a director and creator of mixed English, Irish, and Anishinaabe ancestry who has worked across Turtle Island. Through her corporeal-based practice, she is guided by her own blood memory and how it attunes with others to uncover ancestral knowledge to reclaim and decolonize bodies, minds, and spaces. She is pursuing her Masters in Indigenous Trauma and Resiliency at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto.



Lucy Rose Coren (she/her) is a Canadian theatre-maker whose work before now has predominantly been in the UK. Her projects -- which often engage community members as performers -- have also taken place in Italy and Belgium. She is a former member of Factory Theatre's Foundry.



Richard Lam (he/him) is a Toronto-based actor, writer, musician, and sound designer. Richard obtained his B.A. in Political Science at UBC before training in the BFA in Acting program at the University of Alberta and then the Soulepper Academy. In 2020, he released his own home-recorded pandemic EP Hard Rain: A Mixtape Cabaret.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

ALTEN: I'm very interested, in my practice, in contemporary dance and movement as a narrative tool. Beyond dance as poetry, as image, or dance as experience and ritual, I am curious about how dance can be used to tell stories. And I think this lends itself very well to verbatim theatre.

KATEY: I have been interested in the power of verbatim theatre and how it is practiced within Indigenous ways of knowing, and values to do the work in a good way. The questions that keep circling my mind are, how can I create a verbatim theatre piece or process that is ethical? How can I ensure that the realities shared with me are treated with care and respect? How can verbatim theatre centre around relationship, community, and land?

LUCY: A researcher I came across in my, in my studies, her name was Carol Martin, and she said: "Is there something to be known, in addition to the colliding and competing array of truths that come up in interviews?" I'm so curious to explore that.

RICHARD: I've just been taking my first classes understanding conflict foundations. And my brain is full of possibility for how people can dissect and discuss and address conflict in the moment before it becomes this massive gulf between people – causing harm, causing institutions to bend around the weight of the conflict that people inside it are having. As a curiosity for this Lab, that's really aggressively leaping out at me right now.

8 WEEKS

The Lab's research questions were built on the premise that theatrical experiences are co-created between audiences and artists. As playwright Yvette Nolan puts it: "In theatre you can put all the positions on stage, and work things out in the air." How do we create verbatim theatre that may not have artists and audiences sharing the same air? How do we ensure witnesses remain consequential and interconnected? Can notions of space and time be re-imagined through storytelling to afford all participants a genuinely shared experience?

The Lab sought to move these questions through a framework that centred process. "Let's privilege practice over product" was how we stipulated it in our Contract of Care. And as much as the Lab was designed as a space to share, it was also conceived as a way of being together in that sharing.

The Lab moved through these core activities:

- 1. Focusing on care at the outset; finding a shared language around what it takes to show up maximally in the space and to support the same for others;**
- 2. Interrogating verbatim theatre as a form and excavating its virtues and shortcomings;**
- 3. Deconstructing theatre more broadly as a storytelling medium, its potential hitherto realized and underrealized;**
- 4. Meeting a range of practitioners who, pre-pandemic, were practicing non-traditional performance models and located their work outside of traditional theatre venues;**
- 5. Moving the Lab's curiosities into what we called 'theatrical études' – an opportunity for each Proximity Lab member to be resourced in mining a creative impulse using verbatim theatre techniques and to explore theories of content, form and non-traditionally sited dissemination.**



THE CONTRACT OF CARE

ORIENTING QUESTION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN
TO CREATE A WORK ENVIRONMENT THAT
HAS THOUGHT ABOUT AND WORKS
PRIMARILY THROUGH CARE?

It is perhaps no accident that questioning care – and how to amplify care in a space – emerged from a project focused on verbatim theatre. The highly relational nature of the form – its utter dependence on ethical relationship in order to do justice to its subjects and participants – naturally leads to considering what is needed to create an environment wherein people can show up with their full selves alongside others doing the same thing.

For Project: Humanity, the Contract of Care is a process formalized by Andrew Kushnir that considers how care factors into our interpersonal dynamics along with how care (and perhaps different forms of care) informs our artistic practices. Notions of failure, urgency, history, respect and generative conflict are considered. It is a methodology that draws on many relationships and teachings that have enriched PH over the years, including the advocacy and writings of COCo (the Centre for Community Organizations).

A number of questions may prove useful in considering how the Lab's Contract of Care may have broader resonances and further applications:

What do these contract tenets reveal about what creators need right now to create freely?

What are the barriers to/enablers of creativity?

How have artists' needs potentially changed from before this pandemic era?

Proximity Lab Contract of Care

created May 28, 2021; revised June 1, 2021 *

*this was considered a living document – which is to say that we revisited it regularly as a way of further internalizing these agreements and remaining open to revising them as needed.

Let's endeavour to "speak in draft" – allow ourselves to go back and refine our communication as we see fit. Let's make space to be self-accountable, to recalibrate what we've said, to reframe a thought. "The process is a process, and we are in process."

**Let's resist Perfectionism:
resisting the pursuit of the
'right answer', winning over
losing, better over worse.**

**Let's recognize that
Perfectionism reinforces
scarcity thinking and feelings
of lack. Nothing can be
perfect. In the spirit of this:
let's endeavour to normalize
mistakes.**

**Let's collectively
create a critical
but non-
judgmental
space, one that
makes room for
disagreement
while still
sustaining
respect and
care.**

Proximity Lab Contract of Care

(continued)

Let's give ourselves permission to challenge ideas and one another, but to base challenges and questions in the work we're doing, as opposed to making things personal.

Let's acknowledge that Discomfort is different from being Unsafe. If ever feeling Unsafe, you have every right and responsibility to remove yourself from danger. Discomfort, however, can be attributable to many things including the feeling of something new/unfamiliar, the feeling of learning and growing.

**Let's
privilege
practice
over
product.**

Let's uphold an Open Door policy, which is to say that if you need to take a moment – take the moment. This can take the form of 'video off', breathers, bathroom breaks or refueling (food, drink, fresh air). Please, whenever possible, let us know that you're doing so.

Let's leave space to arrive and meet as a way of making the work less transactional. Let's endeavour to honour entry and exit rituals to our sessions.

Let's be mindful of Urgency and the ways in which it can mutate and corrupt a process and practice. Let's try and locate the stakes in the "story" as opposed to in the "room".

Proximity Lab Contract of Care

(continued)

Let's do our best to share the mic – which is to say have some awareness of how much you're contributing to a conversation and/or making space for others in the room.

Let's embrace the value and integrity of silences. Let's privilege Wonder. It's ok to not know.

When you can, 'show your receipts' – the origin of an idea or concept or teaching.

Speak from the "I" – a way of acknowledging that we come from our own experiences and positionalities.

The experience leaves this space, but the stories stay. In other words: "what is said here, stays here. What is learned here, spread it around."

Let's challenge binaries and binary-thinking. Let's make space for plurality, the chance to say "and at the same time".

Let's challenge jargon. If a word, phrase or concept is used that you don't understand, feel the right to ask for an explanation or alternative. Language is not one-size-fits-all.

Proximity Lab Contract of Care

(concluded)

Let's recognize that there is a history of institutional harms and injustices that inform our present spaces, places, activities, and relationships. This pertains to Theatre as an institution, also to Research. Let's recognize that there are systemic inequities that persist in our working culture and broader society. Let's keep seeking ways to name, be with, and revise these complex forces so as to afford all artists a way of maximally showing up in the room and maximally making their work.

Let's endeavour to respect people's time and to avoid lateness whenever possible. Recognize that a late arrival is often an event. Try to reduce the impact of that event as much as you're able, be that by letting someone know you're running behind, or entering the space with consideration for what's been in motion prior to your arrival.

Let's acquaint ourselves with the channels of communication available to us in addressing any issues or concerns. If you don't have a channel that meets your needs, please request one. Your issues/concerns/needs deserve to be heard.

HIGHLIGHT:

At every online meeting of the Lab, after going around the circle and checking in on access needs and/or any other personal updates, we took up Katey Wattam's invitation for a smudge. She would burn sage in a bowl on her end (in Montreal) and hold it up to her laptop camera. We took a moment to imagine the smoke before us. To draw it to our eyes (to see good things), to our ears (to hear good things), to our mouths (to speak good things), to our minds (to have good thoughts), to our heart (to have good feelings). She invited us to run personal effects like glasses or rings through the sage smoke. As Katey put it "let the smudge do what it needs to do." This ritual brought us, at once, into our breath and bodies and into communion with others. The so-called "Zoom Room" had its edges blurred; space/time felt different.

VERBATIM UNPACKED

ORIENTING QUESTIONS: HOW IS VERBATIM
THEATRE DIFFERENT FROM OTHER FORMS
OF THEATRE? AND WHAT MAY BE ITS ROLE
IN ANTI-OPPRESSIVE MOVEMENTS?

The artists in the Lab scrutinized verbatim theatre. Beyond identifying the form as a “theatrical event where the text comes from observing people’s actual words” and “a story told based on the recording and transcribing of primary material (uncurated, perhaps more organic responses?)”, the lab also called it “a way of exploring a story using the words of the people who experienced it.”

The group turned over whether or not verbatim theatre could be non-verbal. They recognized the gift of others’ perspectives and the constraint of being tied to what you receive. They contemplated how it can be a form and a technique, both in tandem and perhaps separately, too.

But what makes verbatim theatre distinct from other ways of making, when it comes to the question of proximity?

The Lab felt verbatim theatre certainly plays with text/language and concepts of closeness: the nearness of an interview subject speaking to an artist-researcher which then gets put before an audience that often never meets the original speaker. The Lab identified a dramatic sense of irony: we are really taking in the so-called truth from such a distance – through proxies (actors), through aesthetics (the container and interpretation), and through metaphor (the language of the theatre). The Lab turned over how as an artist you must be accountable to the raw material and spanning that distance. The Lab wondered how much audiences indeed question the extent of artistic intervention any given piece of verbatim theatre undergoes.

As articulated in the room, we are “crafting a witness experience for the audience member”, we are “centering community members”, we are “getting people involved in storytelling or story-making who don’t always feel a place for it”. All good things, right?

What worries us about verbatim theatre?

Though not altogether diverging from perennial issues that documentary theatre-makers contend with, it is worth noting which issues this particular circle of artists surfaced. The particular accents and emphases are also noteworthy. A thorough examination of the form's liabilities felt related to verbatim theatre's potential in anti-oppressive work, and this was the list of concerns the group generated:



Liisa Repo-Martell in the *Towards Youth* workshop (2017)

Appropriation: the matter of intellectual property – to whom does a story belong? What is someone's identity/presence inside a work? What is someone's ability/legitimacy to speak for their community? What is the location of authority and voice and how can this be ethically transferred? Can it be ethically transferred?

(Mis)representation: How does one prevent the defamation of character? In verbatim theatre, one is often creating a static image of someone. This risks a lack of complexity/dimensionality, stripping someone's words or account from their original context and/or movement. There is always the risk of resituating another's words without fully communicating the undertaking (which is to say, it's understood by all participants/contributors). What constitutes exploitation?

Consent and Safety: How do you garner optimal and fulsome consent? What roles does sharing the process transparently have in optimizing consent? How do you keep your interview subjects safe in the research process and in the process of sharing that research publicly?

Worship of the Word: How does one counter the form's privileging of words as a primary form of communication? How can the body be considered more fully? How do we resist judging/storying someone solely based on the language/words they use?

Interference: In what ways do influences such as alcohol, drugs, or money impact disclosure and move participants beyond their usual boundaries? What happens when a subject is bent on pleasing the listener and shares more than they want to? What is an “unearned vulnerability” that artists can manipulate for their storytelling aims?

(Re)trauma: How does the verbatim theatre practitioner mitigate re-traumatization when a subject revisits challenging memories and stories? What is the line between theatre/therapy and what happens with the reopening of a trauma box?

Teachings: What is the terminus for a story or teaching? When something is shared with you in the context of a verbatim theatre project, does that automatically mean it’s intended for other people?

Bias: How do the creator(s)’ character impact the storytelling, the lens of the work? What needs to be conveyed of the “author” in order to responsibly convey someone else’s words/experiences? How is the creator casting themselves in the story? How have they been cast (the systemic positionality – be it whiteness, middle-classness, etc.)? Interviews are some product of relationality/relationship. How should this be communicated in the work?



Small Axe rehearsals (2015)

HIGHLIGHT: Katey Wattam introduced the Lab to the concept of *debwewin* – “truth that’s in your heart” as articulated by Lynn Gehl, author of *Claiming Anishinaabe: Decolonizing the Human Spirit*. In an interview with Greg MacDougall, Gehl offers the statements below. They have profound implications for both the process of interviewing for verbatim theatre purposes as well as the ensuing creative process and its ethical/relational requirements. *Debwewin* is a way of understanding the location/proximity from which someone offers a story (i.e. their personal experience, a family story, something they were once told, something they once read, etc.). *Debwewin* also gives us pause around how to proceed with the words or stories of others.

“*debwewin* means a truth that’s in your heart. So the Anishinaabe people value that knowledge doesn’t begin in our consciousness, it actually begins the other way around through our feet in our body and in our heart. And we move into a conscious understanding of it later, as we grow up once the knowledge is already there.”

“...it is suggested that we go on a mindful journey, on a journey to make sure that both our hearts and our minds have knowledge. So it’s – they talk about the circle of mind knowledge and the circle of heart knowledge. They are both a repository of knowledge. And we have to make sure that they are complete in connecting for there to be a truth.”

“So some people will say, we’ll go as far as to say that if you don’t have the heart knowledge element of your knowledge, you don’t have a truth. And what they will also say is that you’re potentially producing dangerous knowledge, if you don’t have a heartfelt connection to what you’re doing and what you’re producing.”



For the full offering, visit: <http://muskratmagazine.com/debwewin-heart-knowledge-lynn-gehl-claiming-anishinaabe/>



*How is theatre
present?*

(How is it absent?)



THE JOURNEY OF AN UNDEPLOYED SURVEY

ORIENTING QUESTION: WHAT DOES CARING FOR YOUR
AUDIENCE LOOK LIKE?

The idea for an audience survey was born out of care: as the Lab reflected deeply on theatre's function at this time, it felt natural to extend these queries to theatre's publics. A survey is resistant to the gathering constraints of a pandemic, and its scalability carries the potential to explore the impulses, needs, and desires of audiences well beyond 'traditional' theatre-goers. In the absence of being able to gather in person, perhaps a survey was another way to connect with our audiences.

On the surface, it was perhaps an unusual impulse. Traditional surveying is an intentionally disembodied experience that divorces data from its human creators, as if personhood obscures an objective truth held in the numbers. In contrast, verbatim theatre lives in the deep, rich textures of story ('thick data') and maintaining fidelity to the source is a central question that verbatim artists negotiate as their narratives move through other bodies.

"LET'S RECOGNIZE
THAT THERE IS A
HISTORY OF
INSTITUTIONAL HARMS
AND INJUSTICES THAT
INFORM OUR PRESENT
SPACES, PLACES,
ACTIVITIES, AND
RELATIONSHIPS."


Further complicating the idea was a legacy of distrust associated with traditional survey research, especially among equity-deserving/seeking communities, whose data have been (and continue to be) misused, misrepresented, or missed altogether.

**"LET'S CHALLENGE
BINARIES AND
BINARY-THINKING.
LET'S MAKE SPACE
FOR PLURALITY, THE
CHANCE TO SAY 'AND
AT THE SAME TIME'."**

These tensions paralleled the liabilities of verbatim theatre that the Proximity Lab was (re)evaluating. And just as "verbatim theatre, at its best, has been about a plurality of perspectives", that, too, is the promise of surveys. How, then, might a re-evaluation of the survey process trouble its historically extractive, transactional properties? What might be possible when we decouple the medium (survey) from the method (traditional survey practices)?

These questions led to an unplanned étude in the costs and ethics of survey-based research.

Imagining from a place of care, reciprocity, and relationship, we reframed the survey as a dialogic device. Central to this idea was the belief that a survey could espouse a reflexive process of both gathering information from audiences and delivering value back to them. Typically, this means publishing the 'results' of the survey, which assumes theatre-goers are as interested in their collective behaviours (how many performances do you attend? What kind? How often?) as theatre companies. We sought, instead, to push the limits of the survey format by exploring feelings and emotions more than reported behaviours. Behaviours are retrospective; feelings are present-tense. We approached the survey as a total experience, and played with the way words and questions might engage hearts and minds to evoke embodied responses that surface our audiences' deepest needs, longings, fears, and hopes. What does theatre do for you in these times? What might it do? What does it mean to gather?



This experience, we imagined, could leave participants with new awareness about themselves, having witnessed some part of them that needed to be acknowledged, or feeling inspired to offer themselves a particular kind of care. We envisioned the survey as an asynchronous moment of liveness; a space in time when they and we would be in relationship through data.

We drafted and redrafted questions, harmonizing existential questions, like the meaning of theatre now, with practical questions about health, gathering, and resources. Satisfied with the questions, we built the online survey and completed it ourselves. It was during this pilot that the question of ‘costs’ emerged: surveys are assumed to be cost-neutral - after all, a survey just asks one to answer a few questions; it’s just one’s opinions. But how can it be that this data that costs ‘nothing’ to give is so valuable to receive? A discomfort arose as we considered what it means to share one’s needs, desires, preferences, habits, hopes and wishes untethered into a digital space. These “unearned vulnerabilities” demand more of the survey, which prompted us to consider more seriously the ethics of the survey experience. How might we extend the Lab’s Contract of Care to our survey audiences?

**"LET'S BE MINDFUL OF
URGENCY AND THE
WAYS IN WHICH IT
CAN MUTATE AND
CORRUPT A PROCESS
AND PRACTICE."**

To wholly understand the experience, we needed to elaborate on the survey context. That is, the environment in which the survey would take place. We had dealt with the micro-context, which is the survey itself, to mitigate issues of survey fatigue (e.g., having too many questions) and accessibility. The macro-context, the pandemic (shuttered theatres, prolonged isolation, social distancing, health threats), was the impetus for the survey. As we defined the contours of the survey environment, an intermediate context emerged: what else was happening in the sector? With mounting pressures to pivot and profit, a plethora of surveys had been deployed over the previous six months by theatre companies, arts organizations, and sector funders to inform their near-future plans. It was inevitable that our survey would reach several audiences who had already been surveyed once, twice, or more.

At the height of our collective cognitive and emotional depletion, it was obvious that the contents and specific experience of our survey were irrelevant; it would not matter why or how we were inviting their feedback, it would matter only that we were asking for more.

**"LET'S EMBRACE THE
VALUE AND INTEGRITY
OF SILENCES. LET'S
PRIVILEGE WONDER.
IT'S OK TO NOT
KNOW."**

It became clear that the most caring thing we could do for our audiences was to sit with our questions, to remain in the unknown. We did not deploy the survey. Perhaps its time will emerge in the future. Maybe it will remain on our digital shelf.

**"LET'S PRIVILEGE
PRACTICE OVER
PRODUCT."**

Either way, the survey practice did its work.

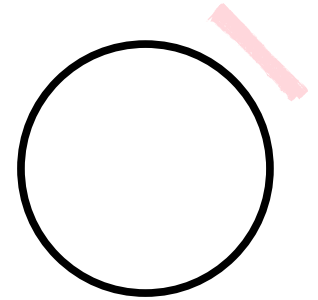


ROUNDTABLES

What makes verbatim theatre work outside of theatres?

As part of its journey, the Lab connected with 6 artists working in live documentary forms who present their work in non-traditionally sited ways (typically outside of a theatre venue). Over the course of several roundtables, the Lab artist-researchers were exposed to a wide range of considerations, creative priorities and provocations, aesthetics, ethical frameworks, notions of care and technologies. The Lab kept track of their personal punctures in these meetings – punctures being a go-to term for Andrew Kushnir, which he defines as: “a moment that breaks the skin, letting something out and letting something else in.” In other words, moments where one’s held-narrative is challenged by another possibility or perspective. These punctures would subtly, and at times overtly, inform the theatrical études that each artist-researcher undertook later in the Lab.

Lisa Marie DiLiberto on moving through communities: presence and perception



Lisa Marie is the Artistic Director of Theatre Direct, a company dedicated to creating and producing work for young audiences, now in its 44th season. She is the Founder of FIXT POINT Arts and Media, the co-creator of The Tale of a Town - Canada, a multi-year theatre and media project that has toured to every province and territory, and the co-creator of Main Street Ontario an animated series now airing its second season on TVO. During our roundtable with her, Lisa Marie shared her process and experience with The Tale of a Town which involved traveling to communities, interviewing residents about their “Main Street” and presenting a theatrical portrait of that place/neighbourhood. Performances involved everything from interview recordings, object play (puppets, miniature sets), video, music/song, live re-enactments, etc.

Lisa Marie’s use of object play (particularly the use of puppets and miniature settings) and camera work to tell the story of a place and its citizens struck the Lab. What does it mean to use verbatim interview recordings alongside highly aestheticized representations?

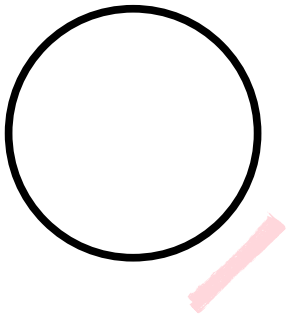
(This “call” will have responses in Alten’s étude, wherein verbatim material is explored through contemporary dance and cinematography, as well as Richard’s use of miniatures in creating a verbatim play with oneself and a table using household objects.)

From Lisa Marie: “Sometimes it’s not about bridging the distance, it’s about removing the barriers.”

Lisa Marie spoke of meeting a story in its community of origin and working with that community (be it a local artist, storyteller, knowledge-holder). She articulated it as an artist’s “Being here, in this place. Being here now” and the inherent value of embodied research – something that activates the artist’s full range of senses. Liveness became conceived as a blend of presence and perception – being there, and maximizing one’s relationship to the place. And that perception (relationship) is subject to change – it is the thing that can counter imposing one’s own story.

(This “call” has a resonance in Katey’s contemplation of ‘debwewin’ and how one can reconcile the tension between receiving, keeping and resharing someone else’s story and/or experience.)





Camille Turner on finding what's been covered over by white geographies

Camille Turner is an explorer of race, space, home and belonging. Straddling media, social practice and performance art, her work has been presented throughout Canada and internationally. Among myriad projects, she incepted The Afronautic Research Lab: a reading room in which participants encounter buried histories. The Landscape of Forgetting, a walk created collaboratively with Alana Bartol and sonic walks HUSH HARBOUR and The Resistance of Peggy Pompadour evoke sites of Black memory that reimagine the Canadian landscape. Miss Canadiana, one of her earliest projects, challenges perceptions of Canadianness and troubles the unspoken binary of “real Canadian” and “diverse other”.



Camille made appreciable what it means to resist colonial white supremacy in content and form. What does it mean to consider the tenets of her Afronautics framework: 1) Blackness is centered; 2) Time is non-linear; 3) Silence speaks and yields information and direction; 4) Imagination is a tool for building worlds.

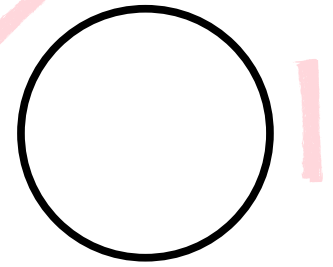
(This ‘call’ would go on to have responses in Alten’s étude: unpacking of capitalism, its impact on artists and their sense of self-worth.)

Camille’s ‘sonic walks’ are opportunities to move participants through sites and peeling back the white geographies that have buried other geographies (be they Black, Indigenous, pre-peopled) using historic storytelling. The body is undergoing a “now” while internalizing a “then” – in real time.

(This ‘call’ elicited a response in Lucy’s eventual étude, which involved a walk through an urban setting listening to verbatim interview material navigating the subjects of shame, sex work, and citizenship. What does it mean to activate the audience as a detective or treasure hunter seeking truths obscured by our white supremacist heterosexual capitalist system?)

From Camille: “What kinds of power systems create certain facts?”

Alex Bulmer and Tristan R. Whiston on beautiful disorientation



Alex Bulmer was named one of the most influential disabled artists by UK's Power Magazine and has over 30 years professional experience across theatre, television, film, radio and education. They are dedicated to equitable and collaborative art practice, fuelled by a curiosity of the improbable and deeply informed by her experience of becoming blind. Alex is co-founder and artistic director of Crippling the Stage with The British Council, and the lead curator of CoMotion Festival 2022, an international disability arts festival produced by Harbourfront Centre.

Tristan R. Whiston is a Toronto-based theatre director, dramaturge, writer, performer, audio and community artist. He has written and directed five audio documentaries for CBC, including the award winning Middle C. He is co-artistic director of Red Dress Productions.

From Alex's program note for the 2021 digital iteration of Red Dress Production's May I Take Your Arm?— an online "assemblage" of records and artefacts presented by Theatre Passe Muraille:

"I can't help but notice the connection between this collected space and how I collect and assemble all physical space: shapes emerge, walls and boundaries are discovered, bits and pieces of knowing eventually combine to form a meaningful whole – through each 23 centimeter step of my feet, through each reach of my hands, through the centering act of listening."

From Alex: "How do I turn space into place into home?"

Alex and Tristan had the Lab consider what it means to decentre sight as the primary access to a story.

What does it mean if the 'guiding light' of a project is not some horizon to behold (some far off experience to arrive at) but rather interdependence of artist-artist or artist-audience in the now. The goal may be to "feel someone's pulse and sync up heartbeats." In our vision-obsessed culture (and our computer screens make it worse): how do we consider the notions of "seeing out" vs. "listening in" in our work?

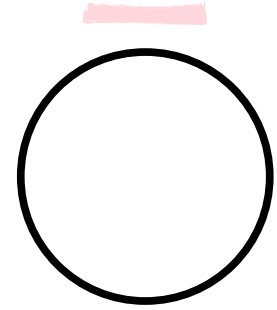
(This 'call' would be 'answered' in Lucy's sonic walk.)

What got highlighted is the value and power of theatre in its capacity to make the familiar strange, or to create "a beautiful disorientation". Spaces and places can be redefined or understood anew (or broken from their white, ableist geographies) through the forces of story and encounter through a range of senses.

(This resonates in Alten's eventual abstraction of verbatim text through movement (or the exploration of 'verbatim dance'). Richard's use of a dice game to explore conflict resolution tools also comes to mind.)



Adam Chen on digital environments and the role of the avatar



Adam is a storyteller and communications specialist who's always seeking new ways to connect audiences with non-fiction storytelling. As a graduate of X University's Master of Journalism program, his focus was on researching and developing documentary productions for the stage. Prior to this, he co-founded a chain of restaurants in Taiwan, and practiced community driven development in India, Rwanda, and Ecuador. Adam is also the founder of Talk Media, a Toronto-based journalism events company. He is the creative director of Toronto Rewind, an online environment (using Gather) created with journalists exploring stories in the city. Torontonians were invited to create an avatar and interact with this world in the fall of 2021.

In the Lab, Adam tabled some of the pillars of his journalistic training/practice and their possible echoes in the verbatim theatre practitioner's work: 1) democracy dies in darkness; 2) hold power to account; 3) seek out a balance of perspectives; 4) privilege the public good over the personal good.

From Adam: "How do we get people into the mindset to be open to listening?"

Adam put to the room the harms of journalism and so-called objective storytelling and the trust-building that stems from sharing your own experience. What is the power, in verbatim theatremaking, of the "personal essay"?

Adam's work explores the effectiveness of the personal and the private as elements to calibrate when the public engages with 'real-life' stories. What is the role of the dark in the theatre? How does this strip us of ourselves in a way that frees up our perception and imagination? The avatar in his Toronto Rewind project has the effect of privacy in public and the permission to explore and play. And might it be a key to experiencing deeper forms of listening when encountering stories that table privilege, classism, and other socially damaging forces?



Chris Altorf on transcending the barriers of interface

Chris Altorf is a film Director, Editor and Cinematographer. He is also a Partner at ISTOICA. Chris has a strong background working in the fashion industry covering international events live. He has worked with Fortune 500 companies, Musicians + Artists, and on several documentary films (including Finding Radical Hope with Project: Humanity). He is particularly passionate about the use of video in technology-especially in how it relates to live events and interactive webinars.

Chris put to the room myriad considerations around the translation of theatrical impulses into a virtual space: 1) what equipment is needed; 2) how the work is shared; 3) where the work is shared; 4) how do participants interact; 5) what is left behind? He flagged that people tend to use what they know and there are a multitude of platforms online that can be occupied and utilized as “digital theatres”.

(This call had an answer in Lucy’s preliminary curiosities about OnlyFans as a platform for her étude.)

Chris had the Lab consider the possibilities of augmented reality, keying (the use of green screens), live video-mixing between live and pre-recorded materials, among other storytelling tools.




From Chris: “How do we bring back the notion of ‘live’?”



THE ÉTUDES





Given the confluence of encounters, conversations and interactions, what did the Lab's artist-researchers want to know more about?

An étude can be defined as “a composition built on a technical motive but played for its artistic value.” The Lab riffed on this notion, as each cohort member focused on a few key questions/dilemmas and explored them through the process of encounter (recorded interviews), dramaturgical exploration (curating, editing, constellating, storytelling), and testing form. Each exploration did emerge from a so-called technical curiosity – a point of process – that invariably resulted in a compelling artistic experience for the artist-researcher and the Lab to consider.

The following are glimpses at what each artist undertook. Details are somewhat sparse here, largely due to the ongoing development of these ideas and the current gestation of future Proximity Lab outputs. It suffices, here, to provide some notions that caught fire for each practitioner.



étude title: We Don't Talk Anymore

BY RICHARD LAM

How does one explore the tools of conflict resolution through a game? Through careful facilitation, how does that game become a verbatim theatre experience that an audience member writes, performs and witnesses with themselves? Richard posed, "how do we create the conditions for healing?"

Richard's key aim was to help a participant alter their perspective on a conflict in their life: seeing anew those moments when we came into conflict with someone and it didn't go how we wanted it to. His étude involved experimenting with miniatures, using a dice system, undergoing prompts for self-reflection, generating a spontaneous script, and defeating a "monster" of our own making.



étude title: Those 50 Words

BY ALTEN WILMOT

Working with actor-dancer Hailey Lewis, Alten created his own method to move verbatim interviews into contemporary dance. As articulated by Alten: "What are the different ways we can engage with listening? What happens when one passage of text or gesture is pulled apart in pursuit of its truth?"

Using interviews about the impacts of capitalism on artists, Alten explored notions of proximity and how we make meaning. Does dance create distance or pull us in tight? What happens when this dance and/or movement is mindfully framed/filmed? Drawing on influences like Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi's "Zero Degrees", and Crystal Pite's "The Statement" and "Body and Soul", Alten considered how dance can saturate, dilute, direct and redirect understanding.



étude title: It's a Shame

BY LUCY COREN

Lucy initiated a verbatim exploration that could dissect the mechanism of shame as it pertains to the sex work industry. How does it function? What bearing does it have on the characterization and stigmatization of women and men who do this work?

Drawing on community connections, and a desire to have community members as the primary performers of the story, Lucy sought to blur the edges of private and public. Do some of verbatim theatre's dangers get mitigated by removing the role of proxies? Alongside this, she began to consider the viability of OnlyFans as a "digital theatre" for her impulse. Her étude process ultimately lead her to creating a "walk of shame" wherein the Lab's participants got to listen to verbatim testimony from community members while walking through their part of the city.



étude title: A Lucky Burden

BY KATEY WATTAM

Katey's étude centered on the ethics of verbatim practices and how Indigenous ways of knowing and caring (including her own personal artistic manifesto) align and chafe with documentary theatre. Katey leaned on interviews with her mother, a TTC bus driver, as a way of measuring her movement through questions, concerns and possibilities.

"What's the burden of this storytelling?" she asked herself, "and how might one develop a creation framework that is healing for all involved?" Katey concurrently pondered how practitioners – the listeners in this work – can take care of themselves alongside those they interview and draw from. Is the trust one builds in encounter with someone extendable or transferable to new audiences? Katey's étude developed into a series of physical exercises for participants to undertake as a primer to any challenging storytelling or story-receiving.

WHAT WE CAN'T UNLEARN

ORIENTING QUESTION: WHAT WILL WE TAKE
WITH US FROM THE LAB?

Although this may have the effect of a summary for the reader, the Lab and Project: Humanity embrace these learnings as things to carry into the future (like any helpful research).

1. "Process over product" defuses urgency, short-circuits some of the pressures of 'outputs' at a time when outputs aren't as valuable as they used to be, or rather, reframes what an output can look and feel like.

2. Care can work as a mechanism to break down binaries. Appreciating that binaries are fuelled by judgement, activating care is a way to nurture a plurality of possible meanings, perspectives and experiences. When we "give a damn" for others, we get creative and ingenious.

3. Artists can be researchers who can be supported to find things that can move them and the sector into the future. Data/research has ripples past the moment they are created and become fuel/tools to interrogate things further and progress.

4. The Lab clarified what is essential vs. what is less essential mid-pandemic to a distinct group of practitioners and a theatre company -- from an artist perspective, from an audience perspective, from a verbatim theatre perspective. This allowed artists to show up maximally, had us reconsider the ways we lean (or don't lean) on the public through things like surveys and how we can reduce and/or counter harm through anti-o frameworks.

5. Artists and arts organizations are well-served by phases of explicit self-reflection and exploration. This requires resources and a willingness from funders and donors to embrace the act of seeking as a worthwhile achievement and investment.

6. There is a cost in telling a story, receiving a story, and figuring out if/how to share it. Verbatim theatre and surveys are different mechanisms but highlight the same principle: data are pieces of a human and need to be respected and stewarded as such.

EPILOGUE

In one of our final sessions as a group, Katey Wattam shared the image of the rhizome and the concept of rhizomatic thinking/learning/creating. The ginger root – which is some combination of root, stems and shoots that develop in an unpredictable pattern – became an evocative example of the rhizome. We perceived echoes in the Proximity Lab itself, when we reflected on its framework, processes and discoveries.

In his education blog, Dave Cormier refers to rhizomatic learning as “a commitment to multiple paths.” He invokes Deleuze and Guattari, who offer “the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectible, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight.” The ginger root. The rhizome.

As an epilogue for the report, we share some insights offered by the four core researcher-artists in the lab: Richard, Alten, Lucy and Katey. These reflections, gathered in exit interviews with the cohort members and presented in a kind of rhizomatic collage, provide another angle on the impacts of the Lab, the notion of proximity in the work we do, and the value of providing a process-focused space to artists – particularly during times of sectoral strain.

KATEY: Like the rhizomes theory, like...

RICHARD: I'd say it's truly about eliminating the concept of hierarchies.

KATEY: Where things are connected but, like – I guess comprised – composed or comprised in a way that is a bit more organic and more lateral.

LUCY: It's activation happening in lots of different directions...

RICHARD: Like, I would say, like, it's about eliminating, for me -- that opening night isn't better than day seven of rehearsals. They just both exist. And they're connected to each other. And they're in relationship with each other. But one is not actually better than the other.

KATEY: I think being able to look at the micro but then to look at the macro, as we did.

LUCY: Having that space to just go away and think about your own work and to allow things as you sort through.

KATEY: And your body is a very strong tool, or for me, is a very strong tool in that research and creation. And trying to listen to how it was reacting.

LUCY: To, you know, disruptively influence that thinking and creation.

KATEY: And then having the space to talk out those ideas.



RICHARD: I really loved the 'fellow traveler' feel of it...

ALTEN: Creating, and being like, a creator, a theatre maker can be incredibly lonely. Yeah, in a way that ends up taking away from the process for me.

RICHARD: There is something motivating about knowing that everyone is in process at the same time. And so to actually have that kind of support group was so effective, and like...gave me such momentum.

KATEY: We spent time getting to know each other as people, as artists, and I felt connected and invested in their process, and in them.

RICHARD: And that there, there was something...I don't know ... I guess I'm still speaking at draft, but like, the, the knowledge that we all received the same foundation, and that we just branched out into these wildly different directions.

ALTEN: I'd hear someone say something and I'd go "I'm really interested in that. But I don't need to go there. Because Richard's going there. Because Katey's already going here. Because Lucy's already going there."

LUCY: Seeing what other folks were doing and thinking, "Oh, like I could do— I could try that", you know, like, I - this is the space to try something like that.

KATEY: I felt like a researcher.

ALTEN: There was a feeling of, "I'm already doing it. I'm already learning that." I can - I'll already be able to walk away with the ability to do that.

KATEY: I feel that was really helpful to expand the periphery of the knowledge that I was gaining. Everyone would think about things in very different ways. Which then made me look at my work in a different way.

LUCY: And I could I, I felt myself just, over a short period of time -- I grew a lot. As did my confidence across that time, because - because of the nature of the group.

RICHARD: Yeah, and, and having the space to really feel like I was bringing my full self into the room all the time really allowed me to make connections that I didn't think I was going to make.

LUCY: An absence of competition or comparison.

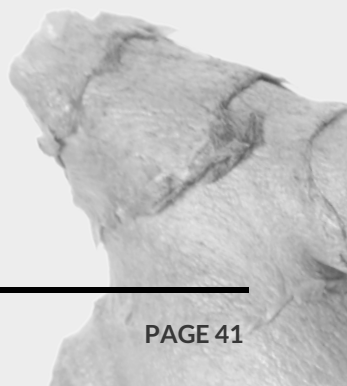
RICHARD: Feeling this space to, you know, every day, gently breaching the separation that I usually maintain between things in my life.

LUCY: It was so safe.

KATEY: The research is the seeds. And then the artistic part is the seeds growing within me.

ALTEN: Figure out something new for myself and bring something new...

RICHARD: Connecting the dots when the time is right in my practice.



If you wish to keep abreast of the Proximity Lab and where it's headed,
please visit our website and consider joining our mailing list.

www.projecthumanity.ca

Photo credits:

PAGE 6: Left - Dahlia Katz
PAGE 6: Right - Aleksandar Antonijevic
PAGE 12: Andrew Kushnir
PAGE 19: Dahlia Katz
PAGE 20: Dahlia Katz
PAGE 27: Lisa Marie DiLiberto
PAGE 29: Anna Camilleri
PAGE 30: Jes Mason
PAGE 35-36: Canva



Quilin
See the whole picture



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

APPENDIX

Proximity Lab Audience Survey

1. What is your relationship to theatre?

(Check all that apply)

- ☐ I have never had an in-person theatre experience
- ☐ I seldom go to the theatre / theatrical experiences
- ☐ I'm a theatre artist
- ☐ I am an avid theatregoer
- ☐ I feel very close to theatre
- ☐ I feel very distant from theatre
- ☐ Other (please specify)

2. How has theatre been for you lately?

(Check all that apply)

- ☐ I've been engaging with theatre virtually a little
- ☐ I've been engaging with theatre virtually a lot
- ☐ I've been introduced to new theatre companies
- ☐ I've been accessing theatre alone
- ☐ I've been engaging in cultural offerings with people who matter to me (e.g., people I live with, virtually, with friends/family I don't live with)
- ☐ I've attended live outdoor events when offered/possible
- ☐ When live events have been offered, they've been hard to get to (e.g., challenging community, I'm not comfortable using public transit)
- ☐ It's hard for me to feel comfortable engaging with cultural events/experiences at home (e.g., it's uncomfortable, WIFI / tech troubles, not relaxing).
- ☐ I haven't been engaging with theatre at all
- ☐ Other (please specify)

3. What theatre means to me has changed in the last 16 months

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. What is theatre to you during this pandemic?

(Check all that apply)

- ☐ An escape
- ☐ A reminder of things I used to enjoy
- ☐ A catharsis in challenging times
- ☐ A way to reconnect with people I haven't seen in awhile
- ☐ A way of being in community with others (including strangers)
- ☐ A creative outlet
- ☐ A source of hope
- ☐ A healing experience
- ☐ A nurturing experience
- ☐ Other (please specify)

5. Thinking about typical theatrical experiences for you, how important are each of the following to your overall experience?

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Important	Extremely important
Learning about the show before seeing it (e.g., reading reviews, watching videos, learning about the actors)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Getting ready (choosing an outfit, getting dressed)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Traveling from my home to the theatre	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pre-theatre events (e.g., going for drinks/dinner)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Meeting up with friends/people I'm attending with	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The moments before the curtain (e.g., picking up my ticket(s), socializing in the lobby, finding my seat, reading the program)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The liveness of being in a space with other people during the performance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Intermission	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Exiting the event (e.g., sharing initial thoughts and hearing other theatregoers' reactions)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Post-event activities (e.g., going for drinks/dinner)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Talking to friends about what I'd experienced and/or posting about the experience on social media	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Imagine the following performances are available for you to attend between one week and one month from now. Read each one and indicate how you feel right now about participating.

6. A large theatre company in the city has programmed a new 3-person comedy for one of their venues. All health guidelines have been strictly followed, audience members will wear masks and be appropriately distanced in the auditorium.

Not a chance	Slightly curious	I would consider participating	I'm likely to participate	I'm in!
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. A mid-sized theatre company in the city has created a musical in a city park for an audience of 25 (presuming this number of people is allowed). All health guidelines have been strictly followed, audience members will wear masks and be appropriately distanced.

Not a chance	Slightly curious	I would consider participating	I'm likely to participate	I'm in!
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. A smaller theatre company in the city has created a show that plays simultaneously in-person for a small audience in a venue and then also online for digital viewing. The company explores ways for the live audience to interact with the digital one. All health guidelines have been strictly followed, audience members will wear masks and be appropriately distanced.

Not a chance	Slightly curious	I would consider participating	I'm likely to participate	I'm in!
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. A mid-sized theatre company creates a theatre experience online using an app that simulates their venue. Using an avatar on your computer, you are able to walk around, interact with other attendees, and take in short performances.

Not a chance	Slightly curious	I would consider participating	I'm likely to participate	I'm in!
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. A smaller theatre company creates an audioguide for you and a friend to download on your phone. Wearing earphones, you take a walk through a part of the city and listen to the audioguide as it takes you through a narrative experience.

Not a chance	Slightly curious	I would consider participating	I'm likely to participate	I'm in!
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

11. What visceral reactions or feelings did you have when you thought about participating in these events?

(Check all that apply)

- ☐ Anxious/nervous
- ☐ Excited
- ☐ Nostalgic
- ☐ Apprehensive
- ☐ Sad
- ☐ Optimistic
- ☐ Social
- ☐ Surprised
- ☐ Depressed
- ☐ Melancholic
- ☐ Angry
- ☐ Resentful
- ☐ Other (please specify)

12. Would you like to tell us more?

13. What factors are most influencing how you feel about possible theatrical experiences right now?

(Check all that apply)

- ☐ My current health status
- ☐ Health risks of being in proximity to others
- ☐ Safety precautions of the venue
- ☐ Reputation of the performance / company
- ☐ Ticket costs
- ☐ Format (e.g., in-person, digital/virtual)
- ☐ Vaccination status
- ☐ Indoor vs outdoor
- ☐ My emotional bandwidth
- ☐ Social anxiety after being apart for so long
- ☐ Other (please specify)

14. Which of the following circumstances would be complete barriers to your engaging with a theatrical experience right now?

(Check all that apply)

- ☐ Being in-person at all
- ☐ Being indoors
- ☐ 'Attending' online
- ☐ If the show happens at a fixed time and you have to attend then
- ☐ If the show is pre-recorded and you have to schedule your own time to watch during a set number of dates
- ☐ Learning how to use a new app/platform
- ☐ Other (please specify)
- ☐ None of the above

15. Why?

16. What factors would most likely encourage you to take a risk (emotional, physical) to engage with a cultural offering?

(Check all that apply)

- ☐ If I trust the performance company
- ☐ If I could guarantee an emotional rewarding experience
- ☐ If it meant I could see people in person whom I've been apart from
- ☐ If it makes me feel more connected to others
- ☐ Nothing will change my mind
- ☐ Other (please specify)

17. Why?

18. What is the emotional incentive of theatrical experiences for you? How might theatre positively affect your well-being?

(Check all that apply)

- ☐ It makes me feel connected to my community
- ☐ It exposes me to new ideas in a unique way
- ☐ It makes me feel hopeful for the future
- ☐ It helps me imagine how things could be different (better)
- ☐ It reminds me that I have a contribution to make - I can do something, take action
- ☐ It takes me away from my tech devices (phone, social media, streaming services)
- ☐ It helps me feel more compassionate towards myself and others
- ☐ I get something from supporting local artists
- ☐ I like the challenge of it
- ☐ I get excited by the liveness of the event
- ☐ Other (please specify)
- ☐ None of the above

19. How (if at all) might theatre contribute negatively to your emotional well-being?

(Check all that apply)

- ☐ I find it rarely holds my attention
- ☐ It takes a lot for me to be in a space with strangers
- ☐ It takes a lot for me to interact with strangers
- ☐ I find theatre tiring because it's hard to understand what's going on
- ☐ I don't like the lack of control I have around how things proceed (for instance, not being able to pause the experience like streaming at home)
- ☐ I get stressed out by the liveness of the event
- ☐ Other (please specify)
- ☐ None of the above

20. Which factors influence how you determine the 'value' of theatre / creative engagements?

(Choose your TOP TWO)

- ☐ Credibility/reputation of a company
- ☐ Topic/content of the show
- ☐ Novelty/innovativeness/creativity of an experience
- ☐ Who is performing
- ☐ Where my money goes (e.g., 'this' percentage of my ticket prices goes to artist fees)
- ☐ How much I've learned at the show
- ☐ How much it has moved me or given me a sense of catharsis
- ☐ Other (please specify)

21. How do you feel about ticket costs relative to the 'value' of a theatre/creative engagement?

(Check all that apply)

- ☐ Affordability is more significant right now, even if it doesn't reflect the 'value' I receive from the engagement
- ☐ I prefer to pay what I can
- ☐ I prefer to pay what I think is appropriate at the end of the show
- ☐ I don't mind paying more if it will create access for somebody else
- ☐ I care about where the money goes (beyond the event)
- ☐ Paying for a ticket helps me to feel 'in community' with others (e.g., because it supports artists, provides access to other theatregoers, etc.).
- ☐ I expect to pay less for virtual experiences
- ☐ Other (please specify)

22. What makes a theatre company or a show something you feel like buying a ticket for and/or attending?

(Choose your TOP TWO)

- ☐ My past experiences with the company
- ☐ Reviews of the show or past shows
- ☐ Reputation of the director or writer or performer(s) involved
- ☐ I'm quite confident that I'll be entertained
- ☐ I'm quite confident that I'll learn something I didn't know
- ☐ I'm quite confident that I'll have an important communal experience.
- ☐ My friends recommend them/it
- ☐ The buzz of the show on social media is strong
- ☐ Other (please specify)

23. Besides (or if not) theatre, what other live cultural offerings are important to you? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Symphony/orchestra
- ☐ Concerts: live bands / singer-songwriters
- ☐ Dance
- ☐ Opera
- ☐ Musical theatre
- ☐ Big name shows from Broadway or the West End
- ☐ Museums / Art Galleries
- ☐ Performance Art
- ☐ Other (please specify)

26. Ethnic background

(Check all that apply)

- ☐ Black
- ☐ East Asian
- ☐ Indigenous
- ☐ Latinx/Hispanic
- ☐ Middle Eastern
- ☐ South Asian
- ☐ White
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe

- ☐ Prefer not to say

27. Sexual orientation

(Check all that apply)

- ☐ Asexual
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Gay
- ☐ Lesbian
- ☐ Pansexual
- ☐ Queer
- ☐ Straight (heterosexual)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

- ☐ Prefer not to say

Demographic Information

This survey seeks to understand what theatre means to people in these times. Identity is often a factor in the ways we access and engage with theatre.

24. Age

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ 65+
- ☐ Prefer not to say

25. Gender identity (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ Two-Spirit
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Genderqueer
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe

- ☐ Prefer not to say

28. Do you have a long-lasting or chronic condition (physical, visual, auditory, cognitive, or mental, emotional, or other) that substantially impacts one or more of your major life activities (your ability to see, hear, or speak; to learn, remember, or concentrate)?

☐ Yes, a sensory impairment (vision or hearing)

☐ Yes, a mobility impairment

☐ Yes, a learning disability (e.g., ADHD, dyslexia)

☐ Yes, a mental health condition

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Prefer to self-describe

☐ Prefer not to say

29. Do you identify as a person from a group that has been / continues to be marginalized?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Prefer not to say

30. Would you be open to a follow up discussion to further explore your hopes, desires, and experiences with theatre?

If yes, please share your contact information below.

Name

Email Address

Prev

Next