

**PATTERNS OF ATTENDANCE AND CULTURAL PARTICIPATION BY YOUNG
PEOPLE IN THE THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES AND CHILDREN'S
FESTIVAL SECTOR IN CANADA**

Executive Summary / July 2016

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this research has been to gain a better understanding of the patterns of attendance and cultural participation by young people in the theatre for young audiences (TYA) and the children's festival sector in Canada. Since this research is the first of its kind on a national scale, it is intended to be exploratory rather than prescriptive. In other words, it does not contain recommendations but rather a number of conclusions based on the various means of analysis employed.

This report on public participation in arts programming for children and youth was obtained by triangulating secondary information first and then primary information second. The information was drawn from several sources: a review of relevant documentation, an analysis of available statistics, and a survey of key stakeholders in targeted sectors. The survey group consisted of about 30 sector professionals that were interviewed by telephone and about 15 others that participated in two focus groups.

This research has improved our knowledge of the TYA and children's festival sector in Canada despite several major challenges. Some of the challenges are inherent in the sector itself – for example, its extremely composite character as a sub-sector of the overall performing arts field, which overlaps other areas of society (e.g. the education system) that are subject to sometimes differing obligations. Two other significant challenges that have complicated the preparation of a detailed national picture of the sector are the difficulty in isolating youth audience activities from all the other activities pursued by many organizations operating in the sector as well as a lack of national statistics on young people's cultural attendance and participation.

Public participation in arts programming for children and youth is clearly affected by a wide range of factors. Some of these factors are regional in terms of how the sector is organized in different parts of the country,

whereas others are due to social phenomena that are sometimes difficult to distinguish.

We found that young audiences on the whole can be divided into different age groups, each with its own artistic participation patterns. The theatre sector has become very skilled at targeting increasingly well-defined age groups and offering activities that match their respective tastes and capacities. This said, some dissemination constraints, such as gathering all the children from the same school together in a gymnasium or auditorium, can counteract the efforts to provide the best possible artistic experience. The highly segmented nature of young audiences is also reflected in the relatively recent emergence of works and activities intended for younger age groups – children less than three years old and even babies!

The TYA and children's festival sector is composed of several heterogeneous sub-sectors consisting of presenters, festivals and theatre companies that cover a very wide range of sizes and vocations. Each organization's challenges depend on its position in the ecosystem; these challenges can be demographic (population decline or ethnic diversity), geographic (isolation), political (government priorities) or economic (local or even national crises).

Some research implies that the world of culture is undergoing a transformation in how people engage with culture – that is, moving away from just “sitting back and watching or listening” to more active “creating and doing.” However, according to survey respondents, although this trend is not as apparent or widespread in all parts of the country, it is not possible to assess the scale or durability of this phenomenon based on currently available statistics.

For everyone who creates, produces or presents works and artistic activities for young people, schools are an integral part of the equation. Although our report notes a number of points of contact between presenters/festivals and TYA companies on the one hand and the education system on the other, more attention needs to be paid to what

is practised and taught in schools by focusing particularly on information about each province's school curricula in order to obtain an overall picture of the dynamics of youth audience arts in Canada. However, the task of compiling and analyzing this information was far beyond the scope of this project.

There is little evidence that new technologies and social media have caused significant harm to the TYA sector in Canada. Although new media tend to expand the availability of culture and are now reportedly even competing more and more with traditional suppliers, they also make it easier for isolated communities to access culture. New media have also given young people access to creative tools that were previously unavailable. For young people who have come into contact with artistic creation or more interactive cultural offerings, expectations of their experience of live art may very well have changed. This is particularly true of older age groups of youth who are more demanding in terms of wanting to access what they feel will be more experiential works.

Many factors and circumstances can affect the capacity of TYA organizations to reach their audiences, and some of these patterns seem to recur consistently. For example, three particular circumstances seem to contribute to the success of organizations that present artistic programming for young people:

- Significant collaboration and concerted action among the cultural, educational, political and economic stakeholders in the same community;
- Available support for circulating a variety of works in under-served regions;
- Development of activities that stimulate appreciation of art by both children and teachers.

Based on the documentation consulted, available national statistics and opinions expressed by survey respondents, the overall TYA sector does not seem to have suffered a decline of critical proportions. The

information triangulated in the research seems to point more towards a situation of apparent stagnation. For some organizations, the law of averages might be masking extreme highs and lows. Indeed, an apparently unchanged status quo might also mean that some sector stakeholders are simply devoting more time, energy and imagination to maintaining it.

Now that we have completed this project to produce a national picture of public participation in artistic programming for children and youth, it would appear risky to use our findings as the sole basis for a prognosis about the overall sector, at least at a national level. Numerous factors affect the dynamics of the components studied and the disparities are sometimes regional and sub-sectoral.

Although the sector's institutions and organizations are experiencing changes with their many parallel challenges, we feel that the sector's key stakeholders are capable of transforming them into opportunities. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that the lack of specific data or information on some relevant aspects is the primary challenge the sector needs to address to complete the picture of public participation that has begun to emerge from this report. To help orient possible complementary research in the future, the following research areas could be considered and even prioritized:

Statistics: better statistics should produce a more accurate picture of cultural participation in certain activities. At present, reliable and usable information is geographically limited to a small number of sources or only concerns some categories of organizations. Other raw data exist, mostly at the provincial level, but a considerable effort is required to process this information in a valid and harmonized way.

Demographics: this parameter is closely associated with statistics but focuses more on an analytical grasp of phenomena that have – or will have – a direct impact on the size and composition of potential audiences for current or future TYA activities. A more sophisticated understanding of regional particularities is needed to anticipate trends

that will affect both the education system and the performance arts for the young audiences sector.

Schools: extensive reference during the research was made to the education system. There are many close interconnections between artistic programming for children and youth and the education system that we could almost describe this relationship as one of dependence. Looking ahead with a view to improving our understanding of this essential partner, we need to document this relationship more effectively and identify each region's specific characteristics in terms of the importance placed on art in the education system. This exercise would be the prerequisite for consolidating, designing or setting up levers for better collaboration between these two worlds, which the vast majority of our survey participants have wished for many years.

Recreation time: this area is the blind spot in this report, mainly because we did not have access to the data required to evaluate its importance or the key informants needed to authentically describe its contribution. Cultural recreation covers an important swath of cultural participation by Canadians in their local communities. Their degree of interaction with professional cultural organizations is difficult to gauge, but, as in the case of other aspects of this research, it seems that this interaction varies depending on the type of community concerned. The most obvious challenge in this regard is how to approach a sector that is even more decentralized than that of education.

Despite the strenuous and thorough work performed, these research constraints imply a degree of caution with respect to this report's findings or conclusions. Although the report describes a few trends and notes several orders of magnitude, its primary value lies in the fact that the information compiled can be used to obtain a clearer grasp of audiences in the TYA and children's festival sector in Canada, in all its diversity. The report's primary role is also to enhance knowledge about a sub-sector that is an essential part of the performing arts ecosystem in Canada.