



Covid Visions

Part 2

Pandemic Chill; Presented Thrills

Dancing Sky Theatre +

Saskatchewan Ânskohk Writers Circle Inc. +

Department of Drama, University of Saskatchewan

by
STEVEN ROSS SMITH



Saskatchewan
Arts Alliance

Pandemic Chill; Presented Thrills

by **STEVEN ROSS SMITH**

Covid spiked. Arts presenting organizations were flattened. We know the story by now: March 2020—the closing of theatres, music venues, literary reading salons, media festivals, art exhibitions and more; the hope of summer, the next wave, the variants. The silence was loud; the viewings shuttered.

History shows that creativity cannot be stopped, and once the body blow was absorbed organizations bounced back, primarily with digital presentations, or such novelties as drive-in concerts with limited audience-in-cars capacity.

Into the pandemic's second year, three Saskatchewan presenting entities have coped, shifted, and renewed, but operate still in an uncertain field, with flexible planning, new platforms, and a tentative dash of hope.

At the time of this writing in early June 2021, the Drama Department at the University of Saskatchewan is hosting their 75th anniversary, a homecoming on new terms, June 1st to 19th. The department is home to the oldest degree-granting theatre program in the Commonwealth. The program and its Greystone Theatre has seeded the theatre community in Saskatchewan and beyond with actors, directors, theatre technicians, administrators, and educators. When asked, just before the anniversary activities, about that impact, drama professor Dwayne Brenna reflected: "Ten years ago probably every artistic

director in Saskatoon was a graduate of our program. That isn't the case so much anymore, but the bulk of actors working in the province are our graduates. We pride ourselves on being part of the Saskatchewan theatre community. There are the big stars too—Tom Rooney is in Stratford and Kim Coates and Tim Hildebrand are in Hollywood."

Since 2015 the department has also been home to the wîcêhtowin Theatre Program, led by recent faculty hire Deneh'Cho Thompson. It is one of the only Indigenous theatre programs in the country.



Production from Greystone Theatre, 1980's.

The reunion's historic reminiscences, gatherings and celebrations were Zoomed, a format that does bring people together without travel stresses and expenses. Yet a theatre reunion calls for theatre, does it not? So, U of S drama offered a digital production, directed by alumnus Skye Brandon, of the play *Unity 1918*, about a pandemic in Unity, Saskatchewan. Brenna noted the irony. "We'd chosen that play before Covid struck." It hit the virtual 'boards' four times, June 17th to 19th.

As I was writing, Brenna was able to report that the production would take place in their Emrys Jones Theatre, though it was unclear "whether we can do this without masks, whether the actors have to be physically distanced from one another." Nonetheless, the play will be Zoomed to the audience—alumni and the public—near and far. Tickets are available online.

How much screen time can we tolerate?

Lisa Bird-Wilson has a thought on that. "Asking people to spend more than an hour on a Zoom call feels sadistic." But she sees its value too. Bird-Wilson, in Saskatoon, is the Board Chair of SAWCI, the Saskatchewan *Ânskohk* Writers Circle Inc.

Incorporated in 2011, the organization supports Saskatchewan Indigenous authors by offering professional development opportunities through workshops, readings

and public presentation of their work. SAWCI also hosts the biennial *Ânskohk* Indigenous Literature Festival, created in 2004 to showcase the richness and diversity of writing by Indigenous authors to the public and to promote respectful and mutual relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The festival is designed to appeal to a broad audience and is one of the last remaining Indigenous literature festivals in Canada.

"Covid has impacted SAWCI," says Bird-Wilson. "Building community is very important to us, as an organization and as Indigenous people. Not being able to meet and share stories and food and community has been difficult. And yet we've found ways to connect virtually—sometimes imperfect, sometimes awkward, but we make community as we can."



1983 Private Ear, 1983 from Greystone Theatre, 1983.

Last fall/winter SAWCI hosted Words for a Freezing Moon, a virtual mini festival. “All of our professional development workshops, events and writing groups are virtual,” notes Bird-Wilson. “We’ve had to sort the technical side of it quickly, and help our authors adapt as well, but now we are in the groove.”

For more than seven months, Lisa and her team have been planning the Ânskohk Festival, for November 2021, in Saskatoon venues including the Roxy Theatre. “The lineup is stellar—Maria Campbell, Gregory Scofield, Richard VanCamp, Alicia Elliott, Jordan Abel, Roseanna Deerchild, Waubgeshig Rice, and Marilyn Dumont, just to name a few.” Information can be found at <https://sawci.ca>.

Bird-Wilson continues: “We are planning the festival as if it will be in-person, but we are also developing a shadow plan in the event we have to do the festival virtually. We will be able to shift gears quickly. Our commitment is to decide one way or the other by the end of August.”

Meanwhile, down the road, in tiny Meacham, about an hour east of Saskatoon, Angus Ferguson, with his partner Louisa, is adapting at Dancing Sky Theatre, a dinner theatre which, for more than twenty years has offered yummy food and professional drama in an adapted town hall.



Lisa Bird-Wilson, 2019 Anskohk Festival.



Billy-Ray Belcourt, Joshua Whitehead, and Louise B. Halfe-Sky Dancer, from the 2019 Anskohk Festival.

When Covid struck, Ferguson recalls, “we were about two weeks from going into full rehearsal for a brand-new play—Kelly Jo Burke’s *The Curst*, strangely enough. We were about to build sets and get all the technicians involved, and in hindsight we, correctly, said this just isn’t going to happen, and so we stopped spending money. The actors hadn’t started working yet. We knew we weren’t going to have any box office income. We couldn’t give the actors long-term contracts, but we committed to giving them two-weeks salary.”

That was an immediate, considerate, concrete response, though the future seemed ominous. Ferguson says: “At that time, nobody knew how we were going to deal with this. Equity didn’t know, PACT [Professional Organization of Canadian Theatres with over 100 member theatres]



Dancing Sky's outdoor amphitheatre. Photo credit: Louisa Ferguson, 2020.

didn't know, nobody knew.”

For Ferguson, stasis was not an option. “We looked at it as an opportunity. We had a year where

we could step back and reflect and regroup. In nearly thirty years we've never had a sabbatical like that. I think we've tried to make the most of it.”

In the summer of 2020, they took up hammer and saw themselves, and constructed an outdoor amphitheatre, which in the non-covid world would seat about 120.

They also brainstormed. Ferguson describes the process: “We understood that the root of theatre is storytelling, so let’s come up with an event that people might be comfortable coming to—outdoors, lots of distance, and something small and flexible.” That set the concept for the first presentation of Fireside Stories in August-September 2020. The second iteration, May 27-June 6, 2021, included storytelling, music, and dance, for masked and well-spaced audiences of about thirty at each of eight performances. The amphitheatre served very nicely, notably on the warm June night I attended.

Ferguson acknowledges and appreciates the support of arts funders. “The Federal government came though quickly, so did SaskArts. And the Canada Council responded faster than I’ve ever seen them move. I think Feds realized that it’s cheaper to pay theatres to pay artists than it is to have them all on unemployment. It’s kind of a no-brainer—keep the institutions going or we’ll never get them back. And secondly, artists work



Dancing Sky Theatre, With Glowing Hearts, 2019.

cheap, so it’s better to keep them working, better too than losing them altogether.”

Ferguson’s gratitude is tempered. “The Canada Council were pretty good with the emergency money. But they leaned on people very hard—saying it’s got to be digital this, digital that. That’s not what I do. I’m grumpy because I don’t think it’s the place of the funding bodies to be prescriptive. They must somehow find a way of

judging the art that we make. They should never tell me what art to make.”

He is not alone in this concern. “We have the Rural Caucus in PACT,” he says, “theatres like Dancing Sky—Two Planks and a Passion Theatre in Nova Scotia, the Blyth Festival in Ontario—it’s been very focusing for all of us, because we’ve all said the same thing—[digital] is not our skill set. We make communal events for community. We’re needed as leaders. People want to come back; we can say okay it’s our job, let’s find ways we can do it, bring them back. We’re cautiously planning the Prairie Panto—based on collective scripts—a big crazy, rollicking family event. So, we’re hoping we’ll be back with that for Christmas.” For updates keep an eye on <https://www.dancingskytheatre.com>.

Ferguson looks deeper into his crystal ball. “And then what risks can we take next spring? I’m not convinced we’re going to be back to a normal. There’s going to be a new normal.”

What will that be? This summer things are opening up.

Will Covid be under control, or be spiking again? Are we sentenced to the long-term doom of Zoom? Or will we be able to gather to share the synergistic communal experience of live events—the imaginative notes, the flights of epiphany, the surges of exhilaration with which our presenters are keen to thrill us—in person, in company, with one another?



Steven Ross Smith is a poet and arts writer. He has written for literary and arts publications across the country. Over three decades, has crafted the innovative six-book poetic series fluttertongue. He has just completed a two-year term as Banff Poet Laureate. His work appears in print, audio and video in Canada, USA, and abroad. He lives and writes in Saskatoon.