

Impact Story:

Sum Theatre



by
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Saskatchewan
Arts Alliance



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Each month SAA posts an Art Works article highlighting an arts organization making a positive impact in its community. For June 2018 SAA features Saskatoon’s Sum Theatre. Last summer Dave Margoshes spoke with artistic director Joel Bernbaum and wrote the following piece.

Every single Theatre in the Park performance by Saskatoon’s innovative Sum Theatre is free. Well, not completely. “We ask one thing after each performance,” explains artistic director Joel Bernbaum, “and that is to say hello to someone you’ve never met before.”

Bernbaum’s favourite moments with Sum are not something that happens during the performances in public places like parks, or even swimming pools, but “after the show, when hundreds of people shake hands with someone they

never met before and say hello. It’s a magic, magic moment.” Why? “Because that’s how we build community. That’s how we create better citizens”, Bernbaum says. “That’s how we create radical love and move away from hate and fear, one ‘hello’ at a time.”

That’s a heavy load for a small theatre company to carry, but the sum of Sum is greater than its parts. When Bernbaum and his partner Heather Morrison first floated the idea, people laughed at the notion of theatre in parks – a nomadic performance traveling to a different park every night through July – and for free, no less. But five years later, audience numbers have almost doubled to 7,000 over the summer, and the theatre’s budget more than tripled. Even more telling might be the long list of “partners” listed on Sum’s website including local businesses and

community associations that want to be involved when the theatre comes to “their” park.

The idea for Theatre in the Park grew out of an awareness that “no one was taking theatre to the people”, Bernbaum says. Even Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan, Saskatoon’s celebrated outdoor summer theatre, “is in a fixed location and they charge a ticket price.” Bernbaum and some friends decided they “wanted to eliminate those barriers”.

The result is a heady mix of picnic, circus and theatre designed to appeal to both children and adults. During the school year, Sum takes theatre into dozens of classrooms, giving students the opportunity to sharpen their thespian chops, and stages performances in community centres around the city as well.



Theresa Stevenson, Robert Grier, Donovan Scheirer, Krystle Pederson, Nathan Howe, Alison Jenkins and Kristi Friday in Sum Theatre's Theatre in the Park 2016 production of Little Badger and the Fire Spirit.



Sum is also in part a reaction to Bernbaum's observation that "art is often leaning toward being a consumer act. I believe that theatre, if done right, is a public act. It is essentially and inherently a community-building exercise. We believe in the power of theatre and the power of community. Everything we do is a braid of those two beliefs."

Sum scores high on the diversity scale, including indigenous youth and professionals, and refugee students in its ensembles. Last summer's play was a retelling of a Syrian folk tale and a Cree legend was dramatized earlier. Partnerships have been forged with various indigenous and immigrant groups.

Bernbaum notes that "theatre doesn't exist without an audience." Over

five years, more than 32,000 people have seen a Sum Theatre in the Park production. "Not only did they share a hopefully meaningful, joyful, thought-provoking theatre experience," Bernbaum says, "but that's a hell of a lot of hellos, a hell of a lot of handshakes, and that equals a lot of community bond. I can't even count how many people have come up after a show and said 'I just met my neighbor. I never knew my neighbour before.'"

For more information please go to <http://sumtheatre.com/>.

Dave Margoshes is a fiction writer and poet living in the rural Saskatoon area after many years in Regina. He was a newspaper reporter and editor, in New York, San Francisco, Calgary, Vancouver and points between, before escaping to the literary life.