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Introduction Festivals

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[See table of contents](#)

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Introduction: Festivals

RIC KNOWLES

In Canada, as elsewhere, “the festivalization of culture” proceeds apace (Bennett et al). Even setting aside the ubiquitous music, film, and cultural festivals that have sprung up like mushrooms—not to mention mushroom festivals themselves (such as the “Fungus Among Us” Festival in Whistler, B.C.)—from the Sound Symposium in St. John’s to the Victoria Fringe Festival, and from the Island Unplugged festival on Pelee Island (Canada’s southernmost point) to the Alianait Arts Festival in Iqaluit, Nunavut, festivals dot the theatre and performance landscape in the land now called Canada. Across the country they turn small towns into tourist destinations and urban centres into “festival cities” (see Johansson, Thomasson). In editing the *Cambridge Companion to International Theatre Festivals* I compiled a list of over forty international theatre, performance, and multi-arts festivals in Canada, a list that does not include music or sound, circus or visual arts festivals, nor does it include the various Shakespeare festivals (from the “Shakespeare by the Sea” festivals on the east coast to Bard on the Beach in BC), the big repertory seasons at Stratford and Niagara-on-the-Lake, or the many festivals such as the peripatetic Magnetic North that have no international component. In addition to all of these, there are twenty-one Canadian members of the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals (along with nine U.S.-based members), not including other “rogue” fringes.¹

Some of Canada’s festivals, such as Toronto’s Luminato and Montreal’s Festival Trans-Amerique (FTA), are prominent within the world’s “élite” international festival circuit, programming shows from all over the world and participating in the globalized festival marketplace. Others, such as Calgary’s High-Performance Rodeo, Vancouver’s PuSh, and Toronto’s Progress, participate in a global circuit of artist-run festivals that are curated rather than programmed and driven by artistic rather than urban-planning priorities. Still others, such as Toronto’s RUTAS, Kitchener’s IMPACT, and Halifax’s Prismatic festivals focus on hemispherically, globally, or nationally intercultural communities of difference, while some, such as the Festival du Monde Arabe de Montréal, focus on culturally specific communities. There are also festivals dedicated to specific demographics or communities of interest (such as the many children’s or TYA festivals and Vancouver’s Queer Arts Festival), language groups (Montreal’s International Yiddish Theatre Festival), or specific performance genres (the Vancouver International Puppet Festival, the Winnipeg International Burlesque Festival, festival Montréal Complètement Cirque). And there are vibrant and productive Indigenous Festivals, including one-off International events such as Kaha:wi Dance Theatre’s Living Ritual Festival in Toronto in 2017 or the Ka’tarohkwi Festival of Indigenous Arts in Kingston in 2019, long-standing play development festivals such as Native Earth Performing Arts’s Weesageechak Begins to Dance (now in its 29th year), and the multi-arts Talking Stick Festival produced by Margo Kane’s Full Circle: First Nations Performance in Vancouver.

Although there has been a limited amount of scholarship on individual festivals and even less work on a more broadly-based Canadian “festivalscape,”² this prominent field of

cultural and theatrical activity cries out for documentation, analysis, and theorization. This special issue, which of course can only cover so much ground, is intended to initiate, spur, and inspire further work in what Karen Fricker has called “a complex, and undertheorized, field within theatre studies” (79). The essays published here focus, not on the large-scale destination festivals that participate in the spectacularized economy of globalized marketability, nor on the neo-liberal and exploitative free-market of the open-access fringe circuit, but on smaller, more focused, and arguably more culturally productive festivals working with more specific local communities.

Lindsay Lachance and Selena Couture, in their purposefully collaborative essay “Transformational Kinstellatory Relations and the Talking Stick Festival,” draw on Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s constellatory and Karen Reçollet’s kinstellatory theories, along with Glen Coulthard’s concept of “grounded normativity,” to explore the festival as a site of “decolonial love,” one that is potentially permanently transformational for Indigenous peoples. They conclude that “The Talking Stick Festival is more than a curated series of events, performances and panels; it is a relationship that claims space for Indigenous artists to perform themselves in the ways they wish to be seen, and for Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants to let themselves be transformed by their experiences.”

The next two essays deal with artist-run festivals that bring together minoritized immigrant and Indigenous communities to in their different ways transform the Canadian theatrical landscape by highlighting non-European “roots” and “routes,” as Natalie Alvarez calls them. Alvarez’s “Roots, Routes, RUTAS” argues that the RUTAS international festival, together with its national companion festival, CAMINOS, produced in alternate years by Toronto’s Latinx Aluna Theatre in collaboration with Native Earth Performing Arts, functions as a “theatrical commons” to “bring artists together,” nurturing relationships hemispherically across south-to-north routes, featuring the continents’ Indigenous peoples, and transforming the ways theatre artists and scholars think about the roots, usually understood to be exclusively European, of theatre in Canada. Brittany Kraus examines the efforts of a second cross-cultural festival, the Prismatic Arts Festival, produced annually by Halifax’s “culturally diverse” One Light Theatre. Without RUTAS’s focus on hemispheric community-building, Prismatic aims to bring historically underrepresented artists from Canada’s Indigenous, immigrant, diasporic, and Black communities to centre stage in Atlantic Canada and Canada more broadly, and in doing so enters into complex negotiations among the needs of minoritized communities, cultures, and artists, the discourses and determinates of the dominant-culture theatre industry, and the expectations of Halifax theatregoers. That negotiation involves “creating our allies,” building communities, creating contexts within which the work might be understood and supported, creating opportunities for dialogue and education, combating systemic racism within the theatre industry and the culture at large, and featuring a broad range of work by professional artists from a variety of underrepresented communities.

A very different kind of “alternative” festival for a different kind of underrepresented group is examined in Heather Fitzsimmons-Frey’s essay, “A Small Festival for Small People: The WeeFestival as Advocacy.” Fitzsimmons-Frey argues that the biennial WeeFestival, produced by Toronto’s Theatre Direct for very young (under six) audiences, functions as “an alternative public sphere that challenges policy-makers, funders, and artists to rethink relationships between arts, very young citizens, and urban life.” It does so, she says, by advocating

for its demographic through its programming of “quality” local, national, and international work; through its creation, transformation, and festivalization of child-centred space; and through creative exchange among artists, activists, educators, policy-makers, and caregivers—creative exchange that takes very seriously the wishes, desires, tastes, and demands of the very young as expressed through their embodied, audibly and visibly legible responses.

The final article in this issue, “Making Knowledge/Playing Culture: Theatre Festivals as Sites of Experiential Learning,” by Antje Budde and Sebastian Samur, approaches the topic of festivals from a pedagogical perspective, focusing on an undergraduate summer course that they offered through the University of Toronto that was based on the students’ experiences attending, comparing, and analysing the Toronto Fringe Festival and the Avignon Festival in France. Locating their experiment within course contexts, critical contexts, and festival contexts, they discuss the course as experiential learning through three different “modes of engagement”: nomadic learning (learning on the move, digital mobility), embodied knowledge (learning through participation, experience, and feeling), and critical making (learning through a combination of critical thinking and physical making).

The issue’s focus on festivals is greatly enhanced by four Forum contributions. Andy Houston’s essay, based largely on interviews with the organizers and with community members, worries about what some see as the relatively small and slow impact of the biennial, cutting edge, and intercultural IMPACT festival on the culture of the Kitchener-Waterloo region in Ontario, in spite of its burgeoning national and international reputation. The remaining Forum pieces involve conversations with five different festival organizers, planners and directors: T.L. Cowan in conversation with Miriam Ginestier and Moynan King, the artistic directors of Montreal’s *Edgy Women* and Toronto’s *Hyseteria* festivals, respectively; Laura Levin in conversation with Laura Nanni, the artistic director of Toronto’s Summerworks Festival; and Keren Zaiontz interviewing Deborah Pearson, founder of Edinburgh’s Forest Fringe, and Joyce Rosario, director of programming and interim artistic director of Vancouver’s PuSh Festival. Taken together these pieces provide considerable insight into the organization, planning, and curation of these key festivals and the dreams and desires of the women who run them.

Notes

- 1 CAFF requires its members to adhere to a list of principles that include open-access or lottery systems of programming, 100% reversion of box-office revenues to artists, accessibility, inclusiveness, and so on (See Fringe Festivals). I am calling “rogue” festivals that don’t adhere to these principles.
- 2 See, for example, Anderson (“Democratizing” and “Luminato”) on Toronto’s Luminato Festival; Batchelor on the Edmonton Fringe; Dickinson on PuSh; McLean on the “Streetscape” component of Luminato; Schryburt on Festival TransAmerique; Willems-Braun on Vancouver’s and Winnipeg’s fringes; Yuen on Toronto’s Nuit Blanche; Ferguson on Canada and the International circuit; Zaiontz on the performance of human rights at Canadian Festivals, and *Canadian Theatre Review*’s special issue on Festivals (vol. 138). For “festivalscape” see Chalcraft and Magaouda; Falconi; Johnson; and Ronström.

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