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Article abstract

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Majdi Bou-Matar's Impact: An Examination of the IMPACT Festival and its Survival in the Waterloo Region

ANDREW HOUSTON

The IMPACT Festival is an event dedicated to theatre that centralizes marginalized voices to address social issues, and in the process, works to constitute a vibrant intercultural community. At once a festival, a conference, and an opportunity for artists, scholars, and other cultural commentators—from international to local—to meet and engage with one another, IMPACT has happened biannually in Kitchener, Ontario since 2009. Yet despite its award-winning status among scholars and artists, the IMPACT Festival has struggled to be embraced by either the City of Kitchener or the citizens of the Region of Waterloo. Beginning with interviews with local theatre creators, and drawing on the intercultural analysis of Ric Knowles and Bruno Latour, among others, this article is an attempt to understand why the IMPACT Festival has encountered obstacles to sustainable success in its home town.

Le festival IMPACT s'intéresse aux productions théâtrales qui mettent de l'avant des voix marginalisées afin d'aborder des enjeux sociaux et, ce faisant, cherche à constituer une communauté interculturelle dynamique. Organisé aux deux ans à Kitchener (Ontario) depuis 2009, IMPACT est à la fois un festival, une conférence et une occasion pour les artistes, les chercheurs et les autres acteurs culturels à l'échelle internationale et locale de se rencontrer et d'échanger entre eux. Malgré son statut prestigieux parmi les chercheurs et les artistes, le festival IMPACT peine toutefois à être adopté par la Ville de Kitchener ou les citoyens de la région de Waterloo. À l'aide d'entrevues réalisées avec des artistes de théâtre de la région et s'inspirant d'analyses interculturelles de chercheurs comme Ric Knowles et Bruno Latour, Huston tente de comprendre pourquoi le festival IMPACT se heurte à des obstacles qui compromettent son succès à long terme dans sa ville d'accueil.



A Love Poem to a City

At the opening ceremonies of the inaugural IMPACT Festival in 2009, Artistic Director Majdi Bou-Matar spontaneously spoke an evocative text, a love poem to Beirut, written when he was a young, emerging artist:

Beirut, I adore you, adore you, adore you...
 Oh, city of kisses, kiss me on the lips.
 Oh, the sand of the beaches, make me forget...
 That I am a woman who adores a kiss.
 [...]
 Witness that those who love Beirut as much as I do
 Are few, I swear are few, few.
 (Bou-Matar, qtd. in Fouk Aladeh)

It was an interesting place to begin a ceremony that was focused on marking the improbable and highly anticipated opening of IMPACT '09 in Kitchener, Ontario. Bou-Matar was clearly caught up in the emotion of opening one of the most ambitious theatre festivals in Canada, and certainly one of the most far-reaching and culturally relevant events that Kitchener has ever witnessed. It was perhaps a glimpse of his desire to fall in love with another city, the place where he has obviously invested his heart, soul, and intellect since 2005 when he founded the MT Space and later the IMPACT Festival.

Fast-forward to August 2017, about one month before the opening of IMPACT '17, which marks the fifth iteration of the festival. I meet with Bou-Matar to discuss IMPACT at a local restaurant that is popular in part for brewing its own beer, and as such is part of a growing cultural phenomenon in the Waterloo region (more on this later). To my surprise, he is not upbeat about IMPACT '17; in fact, he looks unwell. He's obviously exhausted and dispirited. Over the course of our lengthy conversation, he perks up a little when he describes the vision of the festival that will open in a few weeks, but clearly this artistic director is emotionally and physically spent. So, what happened to his relationship with the city with which he once shared love poems? The IMPACT Festival and the MT Space were clearly labours of love, but more so, they are important cultural initiatives for which Bou-Matar has been celebrated nationally and internationally. This article is an examination of what I found when I went looking for the reflections of local theatre workers on the IMPACT Festival.

Personal IMPACT

Before I go any further, I must disclose that I have benefitted from the IMPACT Festival in many ways. I am an artist-researcher in theatre and performance, employed at the University of Waterloo. The IMPACT Festival has generously supported four multi-media performance projects I have directed.¹ The IMPACT Festival has brought my work to audiences that I would otherwise not have been able to reach, and in the generous inclusion of my work in



The IMPACT (International Multicultural Platform for Alternative Contemporary Theatre) Festival was a logical, if highly ambitious, extension of what Bou-Matar created with his company. The MT Space is dedicated to theatre that

centralizes marginalized voices to address social issues, and in the process, works to constitute a vibrant intercultural community. Prior to, and now in coordination with the IMPACT Festival, the MT Space achieved this mission through the creation of celebrated performances, workshops, and various educational outreach initiatives. The creation of the IMPACT Festival allowed Bou-Matar the opportunity to deepen and expand the intercultural mission of the MT Space through a biannual event that was at once a festival, a conference, and an opportunity for artists, scholars, and other cultural commentators—from around the world, across Canada, and the Region of Waterloo—to meet and engage with one another. The festival also allowed Bou-Matar to showcase work that had an emphasis on innovative dramaturgical development and presentation, with a special emphasis on interdisciplinary and physical productions. The IMPACT Festival is unique, and not only to Waterloo Region or even Canada; international artists have expressed that it is unique in the world.

In *Performing the Intercultural City*, Ric Knowles offers an analysis of what makes for a thriving intercultural theatre scene in an urban environment that he characterizes as a “global city,” meaning a city with a sufficiently diverse cultural make up of citizens from around the world. Knowles’s analysis is structured on a few key concepts that serve as metaphors to understanding how certain relationships between artists, their cultures, their surroundings, and the public serve to establish a burgeoning diversity, represented upon urban theatre stages. He begins with Baz Kershaw’s definition of “performance ecology” to address “the complex ecosystem that is constituted by a city’s shifting network of ‘actors’—performers, performances, institutions, artists, administrators, and audiences—organized variously into companies, caucuses, committees, and communities” (Knowles 5). Drawing on Kershaw, Knowles specifically identifies that ecology “references the inter-relationships of all the organic and non-organic factors of ecosystems, ranging from the smallest and/or simplest to the greatest or/and most complex. It is also defined as the interrelationships between organisms and their environments, especially when that is understood to imply [their] interdependence” (Kershaw 15, qtd. in Knowles 6). Knowles concludes that the performance ecology of Toronto, the city he focuses his analysis upon, “can be understood to consist of a shifting and unstable constellation of human and nonhuman actors and factors operating interdependently to constitute an ecosystem” (Knowles 6). From here Knowles nuances this ecological metaphor to include specific aspects of how an intercultural performance ecology is always evolving and exists as an “edge” phenomenon; that is, they are always threatened by the operations of unfettered global capitalism, and work at the intersection of local and global governments (see Knowles 6). Finally, in terms of how an intercultural theatre ecology operates from within, Knowles draws on John Law’s concept of Actor-network theory when he states: “What is most useful about actor-network theory, for my purposes, is its insistence that the social—in which I include theatrical practice—consists of ‘webs of heterogeneous material and social practices that are *performative*, that generate realities” (qtd. in Knowles 6, emphasis Knowles). In this article, I endeavour to describe how Knowles’s analysis of intercultural theatre as a cultural practice can be usefully applied to the IMPACT Theatre Festival. By drawing upon the perspectives of various stakeholders and members of the theatre community in the Waterloo region, I demonstrate how the promise of an intercultural theatre that Knowles articulates is challenged by a myriad of problems in a city such as Kitchener—one that, despite being only 95 kilometers southwest of Toronto, seems well beyond the borders of a “global” city.

Survival on the “Edge” of the Cultural Marketplace

I spoke with several people who work in the theatre community in the Waterloo Region about the IMPACT Festival. I tried to find a representative sample of people who, like myself, have directly benefitted from the festival, as well as others who have a more arm’s length relationship. In particular, I chose people who have significant experience with producing theatre in Kitchener and Waterloo, and I did this because in my first interview with Bou-Matar, I was struck by the challenges he described concerning this aspect of running the IMPACT Festival. For example, an obvious location for most of the IMPACT Festival performances is the Conrad Centre for the Performing Arts. Located in the centre of downtown Kitchener, its main space, the Warnock MacMillan Theatre is a flexible black box space that can seat up to 300 people. Bou-Matar told me that this space can be rented for \$6000 per week. By comparison, a similar style and sized space at the Theatre Centre, in a desirable and hip area of Toronto (Queen Street west), can be rented for \$3500 per week. Of this, Bou-Matar commented that for IMPACT ’19, he is wondering if he should bus his audience into Toronto (it would be cheaper to do so!), or perhaps simply move the Festival to the Theatre Centre. He also described other producing challenges, so, to begin, I sought out another Artistic Director in the community, who has had little involvement in the IMPACT Festival, but has significant experience as a producer.

Matt White has a long history in the Waterloo region; he grew up here, and worked with Theatre and Company, the first regional theatre company in the area, in the early 2000s. After working in theatre in Toronto in various capacities and eventually becoming the General Manager of Necessary Angel, White returned to Kitchener in 2014, to start Green Light Arts. White also stressed the prohibitive rental cost for the main theatre at the Conrad Centre, and suggested that it can be challenging to find blocks of time available because the primary use for the space is for rehearsal of the KW Symphony Orchestra. White admits, “they do try to find alternative rehearsal spaces for the symphony, but finding a comparable sized space often proves impossible” (White). Furthermore, even when availability works out, there are still challenges beyond one’s control. When they rented the space for Green Light Arts’ *In the Centre* Festival there is one night that sticks out in his mind as a cautionary tale about the challenges of producing theatre in the Waterloo Region:

One night, there were only a handful of tickets sold, but next door at THEMUSEUM there was a Beer and Taco night. For \$50.00 you got one craft beer and two tacos. The rest was pay as you go. Seriously, it felt like half of Kitchener-Waterloo was standing outside waiting to get in! The line-up went from THEMUSEUM along in front of the Conrad Centre and all the way to Ontario Street [approximately 100 metres]. It didn’t let up for an hour. It was in that moment that I joked with Carin [Green Light Arts’ Managing Director] that maybe we should start producing dinner theatre. (White)

When I asked him for his thoughts on the IMPACT Festival, he paused, looked a bit uncomfortable, and then said:



Pam Patel and Richard Burrows in *Entangled*, IMPACT '17 Festival, created by Algorithmmyth Collaborative. Photographer: Andrew Houston.

I don't really know what it is. I'm not really sure what IMPACT means. Impact of..., or on... what? Me? What kind of impact? Am I being too literal? I think this can be the challenge in marketing the festival to a general audience. That the meaning behind it might get lost. It isn't the only festival where I wonder "what's in a name?"—I mean what does Luminato mean, and how does that festival differentiate [itself] from the numerous other festivals in Toronto and across Canada? (White)

Furthermore, White suggested Bou-Matar might be "trying to do too many things" and that his willingness to involve many local arts organizations may ultimately hinder the overall effect of the festival, adding:

Some of the local shows don't feel completely ready. They feel rushed to get in front of an audience. It's obvious that not all the projects have had the same rigorous process of development as an MT Space show, and while that can be fun in a fringe festival context, audiences attending the IMPACT Festival have, I think, a different set of expectations because all of the [national and international] productions have been curated. (White)

I have chosen to include this comment from White because it echoes other comments I have heard both from participants and attendees at IMPACT.

Bou-Matar's response to this criticism reinforces his vision of why and how he wants to cultivate a festival that does a different kind of work than other cultural events in the Waterloo Region. Through the IMPACT Festival, he wants to build a community of artists who may share perspectives, visions, resources, and art. He wants a community that is "open, engaged, and vulnerable" (Bou-Matar 2018). In our two interviews, he stressed the importance that the IMPACT Festival fulfill the mission of the MT Space, and as such engage audiences in the messy act of creation and artistic development, thereby being open to a variety of artists with a wide range of ability while also accepting the sometimes culturally-bound nature of the criticism this process of creation receives. His responses stem in part from the kind of judgment he received, as an artist looking for work, when he first came to Canada. Bou-Matar came to Canada as a trained director, actor, and dancer. He auditioned with various theatre companies in Southern Ontario and kept receiving the same criticism, that his accent was too thick or that he "didn't look the part" (Bou-Matar 2018). It was this experience of rejection, based on questionable assessments of talent and ability that has inspired Bou-Matar's desire to create a theatre company and festival that would become a platform for all artists who feel marginalized, racialized, and displaced.

I found another local perspective on the IMPACT Festival from Lisa O'Connell, the Artistic Director of Pat the Dog Theatre Creation. O'Connell has lived and worked in the Waterloo Region since the late 1990s. Her theatre work in the area began when she was hired to be a dramaturg for Theatre and Company; then in 2006 she began Pat the Dog, a highly successful playwright development centre devoted to the creation and presentation of new works of Canadian theatre. When I asked about her impressions of the IMPACT Festival, she said: "[t]he IMPACT Festival is a beautiful and significant event, but it is something that is not really understood or loved by the local community" (O'Connell). She expanded somewhat on this statement by saying that part of the problem is that locals from the Waterloo region have a hard time believing that anything that comes from here will be any good. She continues,

Pat the Dog has had work in every IMPACT Festival, and when I talk to people about the worth and value of the festival, and when I say, "look you may not know this, but the IMPACT Festival is one of the most significant festivals in Canada," this takes some time for locals to digest and understand. (O'Connell)

Perhaps this is an age-old problem in Canada, but in the Waterloo Region, there is a problem with confidence about what we create here, according to O'Connell; moreover, she suggests, "there is a problem with artistic confidence in work created outside the major centers in this country" (O'Connell). This seems reminiscent of the "edge" phenomena described by Knowles, but the insecurity and problem of confidence suggests that there is something lacking in the Waterloo region that might instill the strength, depth of purpose, and supportive relationships, or "webs of heterogeneous material and social practices" that Knowles suggests can benefit the development of an intercultural theatre ecosystem.

O'Connell further nuanced this crisis in confidence among Waterloo region theatre artists by referencing a growing, local theatre empire called Drayton Entertainment:²

We are in the shadow of Drayton here. Drayton creates a specific kind of work, it's a product that is familiar and non-threatening, but it conveys the stories of people elsewhere and of another time. So, if you're building contemporary Canadian theatre, and I would stress *contemporary*, in the way the MT Space is doing, seeing that the local community mostly is indifferent to what you are creating is super-damaging, and negatively affects the confidence of young artists who want to try to make a living here. They feel it is not possible to tell their stories here, and that their stories — that reflect this place — its people, its landscape, and so on — are not valued. I'm convinced that there is an audience in Waterloo region for local stories, and this is what the MT Space, Green Light Arts, and Pat the Dog are trying to do, but we need to build confidence among local artists to do this. (O'Connell)

O'Connell's perspective illuminates the problem of what people in Waterloo region perceive as "familiar and non-threatening," and how this image, manifested for the most part in productions authored by foreigners about other places, is something that a good percentage of the population are willing to support and spend money on. Finally, O'Connell brings this financial context into focus, when she states:

It is very difficult to make a living creating theatre in a community like this. If you're dependent on new revenue streams, which you must be to comply with current arts funding models, sponsorships, businesses, and other funders are going to want to support what the people want, but this is really unclear in this community. (O'Connell)

This combined cultural and financial crisis is what comes of a place where the intercultural ecosystem has not yet significantly taken hold of our stages and theatre practice. Rather than embracing the potential to "reassemble the social" (Latour, qtd. in Knowles 7) through the voices and dramaturgical forms of new Canadians and others with a minoritarian perspective, as Knowles's intercultural model envisions, it is obviously preferable for tens of thousands of people in Waterloo region to embrace a colonial habit of Canadians, and support the kind of theatre made in places like Drayton.

The Value of IMPACT

The preview of IMPACT '17 in the *Kitchener Record* announced that in one week the event would stage "60 live performances in theatres, public spaces, back alleys and historic sites in Waterloo Region" (Grier). The festival is described as "a celebration of theatre where language is no barrier, and old-school speechifying takes a back seat to contemporary theatre full of physicality, music, video projection, light and dance" (Grier). The preview then reveals the festival's opening performance, *Mana Wabine*, "a multimedia spectacle of light, movement and dance from New Zealand." Then, quoting Bou-Matar, it specifies that the dancers of *Mana Wabine* convey the ancient stories of their Maori ancestors, but that this choreography happens within a very contemporary digital scenography, and finally that this performance is typical of an IMPACT Festival offering: "it's the kind of theatre Bou-Matar has brought to



The five Maori performers of *Mana Wahine*, IMPACT '17 Festival, by Okareka Dance Company. Photographer: Andy Wright.

Waterloo Region since he founded Impact in 2009” (Grier). The preview further offers Bou-Matar an opportunity to share his vision of the festival, that “it doesn’t matter what language you speak or where you come from: IMPACT performances transcend language,” and “that entertainment and spectacle mix freely with the idea that theatre can change the world, or at least the community” (Grier). Finally, it’s clear that IMPACT ’17 will offer a stage to works by “Indigenous artists, immigrant artists, refugee artists, and artists from our LGBTQ communities” (Grier). In sum, Bou-Matar is ambitiously fulfilling the mission of the MT Space. So, what’s the problem? In the final part of this article, I want to address what I think are the on-going challenges to the survival of the IMPACT Festival in the Waterloo region. The first is the financial stability of the enterprise, and the second has to do with the changing culture in the region that is a by-product of technological development.

For a perspective of the production side of the IMPACT Festival, I spoke with former Production Manager Janelle Rainville, who worked on IMPACT ’13. Rainville is a veteran stage and production manager and teaches the subject in a variety of university theatre departments, including the University of Waterloo, where she is the Director of Production for the Theatre and Performance program. In 2013, she was the Production Manager of the Magnetic North Festival, when Bou-Matar asked her to work on the IMPACT Festival. Of the two contracts, she said:

When we were working out my contract, I noticed that IMPACT was essentially the same size as the Magnetic North Festival; each festival does different things, but the workload for production management is comparable. Then we came to the fee, and I realized that my pay for IMPACT would be a quarter of my pay for Magnetic North; moreover, I was being contracted for much less time, so with Magnetic North you

began the production process in October for a festival in June, and with IMPACT I began in May for a Festival in September. (Rainville)

Rainville admires Bou-Matar's attempt to create a festival that is mostly run by the artists themselves; however, from a Production Manager's perspective, this approach can be exhausting and time-consuming:

Another challenge of producing the IMPACT Festival is that much of the personnel running the event are artists who are also working on the festival in another capacity. I understand why Majdi does this, it provides a couple of sources of income for an artist, and this is great, but it creates a lot of problems logistically in running the festival well. When I was the Production Manager in 2013, often I would need to connect with the person in charge of hospitality or marketing, and discover that she or he was on stage, performing in a show. (Rainville)

Rainville also pointed out that The IMPACT Festival runs mostly on high school volunteers. This has its benefits and its drawbacks: it's beneficial for the way it offers opportunities to young people to play a role in an important festival, but this approach to labour is problematic from a production perspective because volunteers often lack experience, and can demonstrate a casual commitment to a work schedule, which hampers the smooth operation of the event.

Finally, Rainville is consistently impressed with the quality of work presented at the IMPACT Festival, and she has plenty of praise for Bou-Matar's artistic direction of the event; nevertheless, the process of creating a production model to accommodate a low budget, high aesthetic standards, local volunteers, and international diplomacy in multiple languages was demanding, to say the least:

With many festivals, the load-in / load-out timing is fast, and it needs to be this way in order to accommodate the schedule. This tended to be a challenge in the producing of the IMPACT Festival, especially with companies coming from countries with very different safety standards than what we have here in Canada [...]. What the IMPACT Festival is trying to achieve is remarkable. Majdi invites artists from around the globe, and from across the country, to participate in this event, and stay for the duration of the festival. There is a high level of diplomacy involved. At the Toronto Fringe, for example, artists must follow rules—a minimum amount of time for tech, a minimum amount of time for your performance, and no hospitality. By comparison, the IMPACT Festival is inclusive and generous. (Rainville)

I spoke with other people, who wished to remain anonymous, who mostly echoed Rainville's praise and concerns about the IMPACT Festival production model, but beyond this they were concerned to impress upon me that working for the IMPACT Festival was stressful, exhausting, and paid them less than comparable positions in other festivals or with other theatre companies. No doubt this situation is caused more by the IMPACT Festival's limited financial resources, than by any kind of willful neglect on the part of Bou-Matar or anyone at the MT Space; however, given Knowles ecological metaphor for a thriving intercultural

theatre practice, Rainville's account suggests that the part of this rhizomatic system that makes up production of the IMPACT Festival is not so well aligned with the empowering discourse of the festival's mission, and solidarity of purpose has suffered as a result.

IMPACT in the Context of Kitchener's "Up-Level" Tech. Culture

After IMPACT '17, I met with Bou-Matar to discuss his impressions of how he thought the event turned out. He told me, he was proud of what was accomplished, and that he was awarded Presenter of the Year by the Canadian Arts Presenting Association (CAPACOA) for his work on IMPACT '17. The presenters of the award cited two specific qualities that made IMPACT worthy of this distinction: the programming was considered to be of exceptional quality, and Bou-Matar's peers stated that "the festival portrayed a unique view of Canadian performance culture unlike any other Canadian festival" (CAPACOA). But beyond this, Bou-Matar considered the festival a success because of the way it genuinely creates community among those who attend. This success is experienced by the artists who play many significant roles in the festival's creation and thereby appreciate how it is an event with a soul that comes from its creators, rather than a vehicle for advertising a bank or a brand of soft drink. Moreover, the IMPACT Festival invites its audiences to join the conversation about this kind of theatre—and the way different artists explore the problem of intercultural practice—as it relates to identity, representation, and social agency.

Yet, this celebratory part of our conversation soon turned to observations made by some of the artists from Tunisia, who were attending IMPACT as part of the celebrated production entitled *The Raft*, a co-production of El Hamra and the MT Space. Upon leaving one of the venues, these artists noticed and commented that, outside the theatre space, you would have no idea that there was a festival happening. They explained that when a theatre festival happens in Tunisia there is a good deal of public celebration in the streets, whereas at the IMPACT Festival in downtown Kitchener, apart from some excitement in and around the venues, it's business as usual. This struck me as a significant problem, and it reminded me of Barbara Ehrenreich's book, *Dancing in the Streets*, wherein she offers a historical examination of the deep origins of communal revelry in human biology and culture. The central question that motivates her book is a sense of loss concerning public joy as expressed through ecstatic rituals, festivities, and other communal celebration. She asks,

If ecstatic rituals and festivities were once so widespread, why is so little left of them today? If the "techniques" of ecstasy represent an important part of human cultural heritage, why have we forgotten them, if indeed we have? (Ehrenreich 19)

Of course, one could argue that there are many possible reasons why most citizens of Kitchener are not visibly celebrating the IMPACT Festival with the same public displays of exuberance identified by Ehrenreich, or, say, in a similar way to the celebrations that happen during the city's Oktoberfest, but I think Ehrenreich touches on a symptom of this problem in Kitchener when she offers the following insight:



Pam Patel and Majdi Bou-Matar at the signing ceremony for a collaboration agreement between the IMPACT Festival and The Sharm El Sheikh International Theatre Festival, in Egypt. Photographer: Andy Wright.

Not only has the possibility of collective joy been marginalized to the storefront churches of the poor and the darkened clubs frequented by the young, but the very source of this joy—other people, including strangers—no longer hold much appeal. In today’s world, other people have become an obstacle to our individual pursuits. They impede our progress on urban streets and highways; they compete for parking spots and jobs; they drive up the price of housing and “ruin” our favourite vacation spots with their crass and noisy presence; they may even be criminals or terrorists. (Ehrenreich 248)

The Waterloo region has become known as Canada’s “Silicon Valley of the North.” The region is home to over 14,000 businesses devoted to the tech sector, including internationally known companies such as Google, Christie, Blackberry, ComDev, and OpenText. In the past decade, Kitchener has experienced a wave of gentrification thanks in large part to the proliferation of tech start-ups that want to be part of this fast-growing industry. To be blunt, the result is an increased number of male software engineers in the city, who, when they are not working or doing things on their phones (which is most of the time), they are mostly supporting businesses and events that cater to this new “bro culture.” Chief among these industries is the micro beer brew pub.

In the spring of 2018, Michael Litt, the CEO of Vidyard, a tech company that has by now scaled-up considerably, wrote an op-ed in the *Globe & Mail*. Apparently, the purpose was to encourage investment in the Waterloo region, and in so doing, he was attempting to demonstrate that people in the tech sector care about more than just working all the time, brew pubs, and other stuff that “tech-bros” get up to, he attempted to claim that engineers need the arts, but only if the artists in the Waterloo region “up-level” their out-put to a “world class” standard; here’s a sample of his message:

It's a common misconception that artists and engineers exist in opposition. In fact, creativity and innovation have a proven link. An innovation economy needs a cultural and creative complement and vice versa. That's why it's key to up-level Kitchener-Waterloo in terms of nightlife, restaurants, art galleries, theatres, concert venues and more. A thriving cultural scene appeals to high-level recruits from outside the community, entices young local graduates craving a dynamic lifestyle and, really, benefits everyone who lives here. To this end, we need to find innovative ways to attract world-class arts and culture to the city. Of the grassroots efforts currently underway, many were spearheaded by local companies, and are a step in the right direction. But more can be done—from industry partnerships to government initiatives. (Litt)

In Litt's implied opinion, the "grassroots" efforts of folks like Majdi Bou-Matar and Matt White, among many others, were (to quote Ehrenreich) a "crass and noisy presence," and this was his way of announcing his wish to engineer the culture of the Waterloo region, like so much software....

Thankfully, there was a lot of critical response to Michael Litt's op-ed, including an article written on-line by Peter Thurley that does an excellent job of interrogating Litt's phrase "up-level," and calling him out for his aloof, detached perspective:

The word "up-level" is a really curious, and if I dare say it, insidiously dangerous choice of words. As James Howe notes in a Facebook comment on Vidyard's wall (where a previous version of this piece appears as well,) we already have really amazing arts and culture in the Waterloo Region, it's just that, to our community's benefit, they may not be the traditional haute-culture type of entertainment that high society has come to expect over the centuries. In my estimation, the gentrification of our arts community would be a terrible thing, as it would alienate the many people who already contribute to a thriving arts and culture community. In other words, just because we can't compete with Sydney's Opera House doesn't mean that we can't together contribute to make what we already have even better! [...]

If Michael Litt means what he writes, I look forward to seeing how Vidyard will step up to the plate and sponsor some of the already existing arts and culture of our community. And if new recruits from cities across the world don't want to come to Kitchener-Waterloo because we don't have a museum for Italian Renaissance art, then that's their problem, not ours. (Thurley)

It's heartening to read such an impassioned statement of support for the unique approach to art in this region, but to this day, there's no evidence that this feedback changed Michael Litt's mind; in fact, the opposite has happened.

In May of 2018, Communitech, a well-established hub for the tech start-up community, held a three-day conference entitled The True North Festival. The tagline for the event was "Tech for Good" and the event seemed to be an attempt at a response to Litt's plea that "an innovation economy needs a cultural and creative complement." According to the *Kitchener Record*, the festival featured "live music, tours, craft beer and food pairing, outdoor yoga, documentary films, place-hacking, and exhibitions" (Pender). In my interview with Pam Patel, the

recent successor of Bou-Matar as Artistic Director of the MT Space, she described The True North Festival as emblematic of the poor relationship between local artists, and the tech. sector:

The headlining acts at True North were all from somewhere else, despite the local talent that could've done this job. The promotion for the event promised Spike Jonze, alongside the CEO of Pixar, the Chief Brand Officer at Uber, and Vidyad's Michael Litt. Meanwhile, local artists were given a minute each to speak about their work. That's about enough time to tell a good joke. (Patel)

To return to Ric Knowles ecological metaphor, to describe the various relationships that may allow an intercultural theatre culture to survive, it would seem that the fast-growing tech sector in the Waterloo region conceives of itself as somehow above or beyond this network, and the effort of developing strong, meaningful relationships with local artists. If, to follow Knowles's metaphor, the artists of the MT Space and the IMPACT Festival are akin to a rhizomatic root system, the tech. sector's seemingly single-minded focus on the economy make it akin to all that towers above what grows beneath this perspective, in the trunk and branches of the trees. Geneticist and environmentalist David Suzuki reminds us that economics and ecology are both based on the Greek word *oikos*, meaning household or domain (see Suzuki 39). Ecology is the study of home, while economics is its management. Ecologists try to determine the conditions, laws, and principals that enable life to survive and flourish. By elevating the economy above ecological principles, we assume that we are immune to the relationships that sustain us; that somehow we are above our place within the ecosystem, and the relationships we share with the natural world. If the tech. sector is to thrive in a sustainable way in the Waterloo Region, it had better acknowledge and cultivate a relationship with a root structure, found with local artists.

The Impact of Pioneers

In his 2009 essay, entitled "Festivalizing' Performance: Community and Aesthetics through the Lens of Three Festival Experiences," David Van Belle considers the construction and function of the festival as a performance event distinct from the individual events that comprise it, calling it a "meta-event" (Van Belle 8). His use of the term "festivalizing" is useful; turning the noun into a verb implies action. Van Belle expands on this notion of action, identifying the festival as a "*cultural event* which in its own way *eventifies* elements and issues of the particular society in which it is taking place," recommending that performance theorists address festivals, not just as collections of performances, but also "*as performances* or *as theatrical events* in their own right" (Van Belle 8). Once we accept that a festival not only is something but does something, we can also examine what festivals do to the works they program and also what they do to the communities, comprised of both artists and of attendees, in which they exist. This is a symbiotic relationship (see Van Belle 8-9).

I want to conclude this article with a perspective of a symbiotic relationship between Bou-Matar, the MT Space, the IMPACT Festival, and the public—including those who choose not to attend the IMPACT Festival—because I have to believe that Bou-Matar's love poem was not in vain; rather, this act, and every aspect of his struggle to cultivate the heterogeneous

material and social practices that make up the ecosystem of the IMPACT Festival will take root and grow. In speaking with Pam Patel, about the legacy of Bou-Matar's struggle that she must now make her own, she said, "We are pioneers for what the future looks like" (Patel). The work of a pioneer is never easy, but if it takes root, it is deeply rewarding, and ensures an impact on the future.

Notes

- 1 Here is a list of performances I have directed that have been presented at the IMPACT Festival: *Edna's Archive* (IMPACT'09), *Here Be Dragons* (IMPACT'11), *Voicemail* (IMPACT'13), *Entangled* (IMPACT'17).
- 2 Founded in 1990, and developed out of strong community support, the Drayton Festival Theatre was formed to "promote, produce, and present professional theatre of the highest artistic standards, and to function as facilitator for other cultural and educational activities" (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drayton_Entertainment). In 1991, Alex Mustakas was hired as the Artistic Director, a position he has held ever since, and with the help of director Alan Lund Mustakas staged *Vaudeville!*, and two other musicals that attracted over 14,000 visitors to the village. Throughout the 1990s, Drayton experienced sold out runs of musicals and other similar style productions, and over these years, Drayton Entertainment has emerged as a large, although not-for-profit, organization of seven theatres across Ontario.

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