

The Next Act

A grant from ECF to the Citadel Theatre proves that when it comes to supporting the arts in tough times, the show must go on

By Michael Hingston





Late last year, the Citadel Theatre found itself having to face some tough facts. Thanks to a groggy economy, as well as a growing gap between the theatre's old-fashioned marketing tactics (buying ads and waiting for the customers to roll in) and how people now access information, the number of subscribers for Edmonton's most prestigious playhouse had been in decline for several years.

Now, another theatre might've just sat back and watched how things worked themselves out. Maybe this was just a hiccup. Or maybe it was an omen of even worse things to come. Either way, says Joyce LaBriola, the Citadel's director of marketing and development, they couldn't afford to wait and find out. They needed "to stay with the curve, instead of chasing behind it."

LaBriola and her colleagues had recently heard about TRG, a Colorado-based arts consulting group. A Vancouver theatre company, the Arts Club, had hired TRG to help them navigate problems similar to the Citadel's: aging audiences, changes in technology and a shrinking slice in the pie chart of entertainment options, to name a few.

The problem was that the bulk of TRG's fee would have to be paid up front — and the Citadel simply didn't have that kind of cash on hand. So they picked up the phone and called Edmonton Community Foundation.

Scott Graham picked up the other end. As ECF's director of community grants, he represents the first of three checkpoints a non-profit has to get through in order to qualify for funding. Second is a review by the relevant committee for the type of project being proposed (in the Citadel's case, this was the Arts, Culture and Heritage Advisory Committee). Third is the ECF board. "Our job is to make the community better," Graham says. "That's what we do here."

Graham worked with the Citadel to help refine their proposal, but he gives them major points for coming in the door with a goal that was clear and practical: to increase their subscriber base and to establish a new system of direct marketing aimed at the customers they already have. These are important factors for ensuring the board's approval, but also for Graham's responsibility to the people who've given ECF money in the first place. "Our ultimate scrutiny is our donors," he says. "We want to be seen as making good, effective grants in the community."

The amount of money the Citadel requested was \$20,000, which falls well within ECF's limits for community grants (they have an approximate top end of \$40,000 for any single project). Proposals for grant funding also need to demonstrate how they will benefit the city of Edmonton — and the wider impact they can have, obviously, the better.

Graham says this part of the decision-making process was easy.

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“Who *doesn't* benefit from having a great Citadel Theatre downtown?” he asks. “It’s a great

benefit to all sorts of people... and it also strengthens the overall arts sector. There's nobody who doesn't win out of a grant like this.”

The advisory committee and ECF board agreed. A cheque went out to the Citadel in May — just six months after that first phone call.

From there, the theatre was able to hire TRG and get to work right away. First, the consultants drew upon all of the Citadel's existing patron information: the thousands upon thousands of transactions the theatre has on file from previous seasons. This allowed TRG to create what they call “heat maps” for every single seat, showing how often each one gets filled and which areas contain “the hottest” seats in the house.

There were some surprising findings. In the past, LaBriola says, traditional theatre wisdom had it that

By Shauna Rudd
Photo: Andrew Paul



Culture Shock

Saturday nights were far and away the most popular; TRG's statistics, however, suggested that pretty much every night has a similar draw. It's tough to argue with numbers like these. TRG's program is doing for the Citadel what sabermetrics (the analysis of baseball statistics) did for Billy Beane's Oakland Athletics in *Moneyball*.

Armed with this new-found knowledge, the Citadel has replaced its single-price system with a new, three-tiered one that reflects their true demographics. This means that the most in-demand seats on TRG's heat maps have gone up in price but, LaBriola says, "by and large, our ticket prices are a little lower."

They've also used this wealth of patron data to circumvent traditional mass advertising, and instead, start speaking to their customers directly based on customer-centric research. Let's say you don't come to that many shows, but you're the first in line for every musical the Citadel puts on: now you've started getting personalized e-mails from LaBriola, offering you a discount on the latest musical if you buy a ticket within the week.

"The whole methodology is not getting you to buy a ticket once — to fix the short-term problem of getting you in the door — but rather building relationships with an emphasis on patron loyalty," LaBriola says. "By doing that, you make sure they come back over and over again. They become your lifeblood."

Final numbers have yet to be revealed, as the Citadel plans to continue working with TRG as part of a longer-term, five-year plan. But subscription numbers are already way up from last year, and the theatre and ECF alike are thrilled at what the Citadel has been able to accomplish so far.

"What I really appreciated about [TRG]," LaBriola says, "was they were able to be objective, and teach us a new way to read our data."

It helps that the city at large is supportive, too. "The nature of Edmonton in particular is lovely and collaborative, and completely non-territorial," adds Graham. "We've never had pushback from other agencies, saying, 'Why do they get a grant?'" Instead, he says, "everybody applauds." 🌊

If you're part of a non-profit with charitable status that could benefit from funding to help boost the community, contact ECF at 780-426-0015.

Made possible by a Youth Empowerment Program grant from ECF, and staged this summer at the Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival, *Magnetmonton* follows the trials of the Duke of Science, who floats above the city in his high-tech blimp lab as he attempts to understand the evil force that makes people *choose* to live in Edmonton. The Duke (actor and playwright Ben Gorodetsky), shares his insight.

Have you come any closer to understanding the evil force that draws people here?

In the beginning of my research, I knew for certain that Edmonton was hell on earth. The "force" makes people think that they can come here for a good education or economic opportunities, or for love — but they're all lying to themselves. This force prevents [humans] from seeing Edmonton for what it really is — this cold, flat, dark, murder capital of Canada — and makes them *like* eating donairs and walking around in snow.

When you bring your research subjects up to your blimp lab, are they completely oblivious to the fact that they're under an evil influence?

They are. Some of them begin to realize because they grew up elsewhere. I talked to a woman who grew up in Norway. She came here for a year in the '60s, and acknowledged that she was confused about how she was still here. But we worked through it together: She had found love, and community, and opportunity, and other great "unities."

What have you come to understand toward the end of your research?

I think I may have judged Edmonton too harshly. Edmontonian's community is deeper and more complex. The coldness is tempered by the warmth of the communities and the abundance of theatres and cafes and other enclosed spaces where people gather, out of the cold, and this in turn creates more rewarding interpersonal connections, which I of course have not experienced because I've been living in a blimp by myself for five years.