

Winnipeg Independent Theatre (WIT)

Strategic Priorities Plan 2020-2022

Produced By: Sue Hemphill, Healthy Hive Consulting – for organizational and community development

INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND

Winnipeg Independent Theatre (WIT) was formed in approximately 2002. At the start of this Strategic Priorities Plan 2020-2022, WIT will be 13 years old. WIT is established to act as the “*umbrella*” or “*back-bone*” organization for the many professional independent theatre companies in Winnipeg.

WIT's mandate is to promote independent theatre in Winnipeg. WIT exists to share resources, develop marketing synergies, and foster support for independent theatre with the goal of strengthening individual and collective profiling and patronage. A representative of each member company serves as a Director of WIT on a voluntary basis.

WIT activities are overseen by a collective of incorporated, non-profit theatre companies based in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The companies that manage WIT initiatives (i) produce theatre annually (ii) are incorporated or have registered names, (iii) are run by professional artists who view the discipline as a vocation and are beyond basic levels of training, (iv) operate with limited budgetary support and staff, and (v) do not own their own production facilities.

WIT current members are: Echo Theatre, Theatre by the River, Incarnate Theatre, One Trunk, Moving Target Theatre Company, Dry Cold Productions, Circus of Objects, The Talentless Lumps, Sarasvati Productions, White Rabbit Productions, and Winnipeg Studio Theatre. Two Indie companies joined as members in 2019 and there are numerous emerging (often early career) indie theatre companies who are prospective members for the future who could add to the energy and resources WIT has to work with in the future.

For the first 11 years of its existence WIT was establishing itself, it was informal and functioned more as a network of Indie Companies for problem solving and peer support. In 2018 WIT recognized that it is time to take the organization to another stage of development, with some part-time staff resources and O.D. / C.D. consultant services to guide the steps in developing its' first Strategic Priorities Plan.

The Strategic Priorities Plan is intended to help the WIT membership (Indie Theatre Companies) become more cohesive, more effective, more collaborative and therefore have greater individual and collective impact. In 2018 a project proposal was submitted to the Winnipeg Foundation and funding was approved and granted to support WIT in this first phase of organizational and sector growth;
to take WIT (and Indie Theatre in Winnipeg) *From Surviving to Thriving!*

In late winter and early spring WIT hired its' first part-time Coordinator and its first Organizational Development and Community engagement Consultant. Both paid personnel started working in early spring 2019.

CURRENT CONTEXT / THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

The start of the project after personnel were hired was an **All Company Members (all day) Planning Retreat**, held on Sat. May 11, 2019. The day was facilitated by the Org. Development Consultant and the result of the day long retreat produced: a preliminary working draft of Strategic Priorities and Activities, the corresponding work plan for the Coordinator, and introduced the need for establishing task-teams (member-volunteer working committees). Ad Hoc (short-term) Task-Teams were created to take immediate action on the project initiatives outlined in the funding proposal to create the Strategic Priorities Plan for 2020 - 2022.

During the 2019 project WIT conducted its' first ever **Online Community / Audience Engagement Survey** (open throughout July), launched during the Fringe Festival); receiving 100 survey responses, with 50 participants providing their contact information indicating a willingness to contribute their time to attend a focus group. *Summary document available.*

Survey participants

- are aware of **23 distinct Indie Theatre Companies**
- wish for / desire:
 - direct advertisement providing notice well in advance, as well as leading up to performances
 - purchasing tickets in a package deal (multi-Indie theatre subscription)
 - featuring local writers, actors and issue and under-represented population / identity and issue based content, musicals, and comedies
 - longer show runs
- appreciate most about Indie Theatre is:
 - 87% it is local
 - 64% it is edgy
 - 64% it is more intimate
 - 54% it is collaborative
 - 49% it is provocative
 - 64% it is relevant

In August, after the close of the online Community / Audience Engagement Survey a meeting was held of two Task-Teams (a quorum of the All members / Directing Members /DM's) to: 1. do quick initial reflection on the Survey Highlights and 2. plan a Key Stakeholders Consultation / Large Focus Group Session.

Through August and September the Coordinator and Consultant team worked collaboratively resulting in WIT holding its' first ever **Key Stakeholder Consultation Session** on Sat. Oct. 5, 2019. The Key Stakeholder Session was "by invite" only and keen thought was given to which organizations and groups to invite.

The **response to the invitations** (emails and phone follow-up) **was strongly positive, with over 40 people / organizations expressing interest and appreciation to being invited and 30 people in total attended**; representatives from: established well resources theatres, emerging

independent theatre artists and emerging indie theatre companies, arts councils;. Those that indicated though they were not available to attend expressed they would like to be involved in the future.

The purpose of the Stakeholder Consultation was to share the results of the Community Engagement Survey, get feedback from Key Stakeholders on the survey and their own environmental scans, and start a dialogue exploring further planning for collaboration and collective impact. *Summary document available.*

Some of the themes and / or consensus that emerged at the Key Stakeholder Consultation confirmed that:

- Indie theatre is under-resourced in comparison to the annual subscription theatres with their own performance spaces.
- Indie theatre is where majority of emerging trained actors will gravitate for gaining experience, more accessible than mainstage theatres
- Indie theatre in Winnipeg is going through a period of significant growth (an explosion) of emerging companies.
- Annual subscription theatres need a vital and vibrant supported local Indie Theatre community, that Indie theatre is vital to the theatre and arts community ecology.
- Annual subscription theatres could do more to actively support and collaborate with Indie theatre (better sharing of their resources).
- There are models in other jurisdictions that could be replicated (and modified) to fit Winnipeg, many of which are longer term projects; beyond the next two years of this Strategic Priorities Plan, though research and ground-work started during this two year period.

The final step to forming the priorities in the WIT Strategic Plan was **one final All (Directing Members Integration Gathering** which took place on Nov. at U of W, over a ¾ day on Sat. Nov. 30, 2019. The purpose of this final meeting was to integrate all of the input and feedback provided, reflect on the concrete accomplishments and products that WIT gained through the work and talent of their Part time Coordinator. In addition to supporting the logistics of the two initiatives and the 3 All WIT members' planning meetings, the task teams, from May through to Dec.2019 the Project Coordinator was busy focusing on the priority of marketing and promotions, The Coordinator:

- updated and upgraded the website
- created a social media presence
- created the Theatre Hub annual theatre in Winnipeg calendar
- developed a new member company orientation document (outlining benefits and expectations)
- supported the First Fridays WIT Bits
- took videos of companies for use on the website and in future promotion.

The result of the two initiatives the Community Engagement Survey and the Key Stakeholder Consultation combined with the collaborative planning and increase in collaborative promotion (facilitated by 3 All members meetings and the ongoing support from the part-time Coordinator) strongly confirmed there is a lot of support for and interest in maintaining and growing the momentum towards growth (increased resources and increased participation) in Independent Theatre in Winnipeg. The continuous activity also confirmed the need for an ongoing part time Coordinator and Organizational Development support to maintain and build on the momentum created through this past year.

WIT is at the start of an exciting new era!

In the first three months of 2020, the part-time Coordinator will be working with WIT Directing -Members (D-M's) to create the work plan and committee structures (volunteer members) that are required to undertake the actions and activities outlined in the Strategic Priorities Plan. Even with well resources / composed and dedicated committees (equipped with terms of references and work plans in place) it is going to be a bigger challenge for the committees to stay organized and follow through / maintain the momentum without the support of the part-time Coordinator (which end in end of march 2020) nor the guidance of an Organizational Development Consultant available through 2020 - 2022.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND OBJECTIVES

Membership Development and Engagement

1. Create new member category / ies
2. Articulate benefits of becoming a WIT member
3. Re-examine membership fees (create different fee levels for different levels of benefit and contribution?)
4. Outreach to emerging Indie theatre companies, explore needs and offers to contribute to WIT

Governance, Organizational Development and Sustainability

1. Affirm operating values and decision-making model / style
2. Affirm leadership governance group or body composition.
3. Create an annual meeting schedule for Directing Management Group / Body (D-M's).
4. Outline plan for Internal (amongst WIT member companies) communications management.
5. Establish any unwritten practices into policies.
6. Distribution of work through both ongoing and ad hoc committees / task-teams
7. Create internal Memorandum of Understanding / Collaborations within and between WIT members (resources have been developed in phase one project, what is the understanding about how members companies will use the info and resources, e.g.: combined contact database)
8. Fundraising; submit / create a phase two project proposal to The Winnipeg Foundation aim for April 2020 deadline / intake (after reporting on Phase One).
9. Research other funding sources for either a global (all priority areas and objectives proposal, or for parts of the 2020-2022 plan.
10. Consider hiring a global grant writer on a contract, or to write a Case for Support.
11. Consider a next stage of organizational and board development with an organizational development consultant

Marketing, Promotion and Audience Development

1. Maintain the website updates (monthly?)
2. Maintain the Theatre Hub "*Year at a Glance*" an all theatre in Winnipeg calendar
3. Increase profile of member companies

4. Public education / dispel myths and misconceptions regarding definition and caliber of independent theatre
5. Take next steps in branding WIT and indie theatre in Winnipeg
6. Start a WIT e-newsletter.
7. Maintain and grow First Fridays "WIT Bits"
8. Pilot a multi member company ticket package indie theatre throughout the year. Determine which member companies would like to be involved in the pilot, dialogue to create the package details. Promote / advertise the package.
9. Meet with media and deliver pre-determined "pitch" asking for previews, reviews and advertising
10. Undertake an Annual Community Engagement Survey, replicate and build on pilot survey.
11. Initiate a Buy Local Indie theatre campaign and collaboration with other buy local / indie creators initiatives, like the pop-up markets, e.g.: Third and Bird
12. Ask artists and all WIT member companies to put WIT links on their promo materials

Leverage Relationships and Common Goals, Formalize Collaboration and Innovate with Key Partnerships

1. Follow up with key partners and key stakeholders to establish clear understanding and Memorandums of Collaboration, face to face meetings "crucial partnership exploration conversations" with each key partner.
2. Task Team or committee created for this priority and action steps. Important that the same people be at each partnership exploration conversation so that message is consistent. Good negotiators would be ideal.

Meetings with:

- a. Media
- b. Large / major subscription season theatre companies (RMTC, PTE,
- c. Arts councils (WAC< MAC< CCFA)
- d. Equity
- e. Ellice Theatre

From Information Sharing to Collaboration and Collective Impact - Sharing Resources Between WIT Member Companies

1. Distribute or make available the combined contact database, with expectations for use outlined.
2. Create and **inventory of Resources and Assets** that member companies have and are not using all through the year, and would be willing to make available to lend out to other Indie companies.
3. Create an Inventory of the resources and assets that member companies need
4. Finalize the **Physical Hub Online Members Survey**, synthesize and reflect on the results, as a first step in exploring and determining the feasibility and level of need and urgency of the mid to long term project of establishing a physical Hub space that all members could utilize for: storage, rehearsal and performance.
5. Find or create a communication mechanism to facilitate the matching of resources available to needs, some online lending booking schedule.