



GORDON TOOTOOSIS

GTNT

NĪKĀNĪWIN THEATRE

ANNUAL
REPORT
2020-2021



Canada Council for the Arts
Conseil des arts du Canada



Eagle Feather NEWS



Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada





SUMMARY

Despite the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic presented to the live theatre sector, the Gordon Tootoosis Nīkānīwin Theatre produced more live and digital theatrical works in 2020-2021 than we have in previous live seasons.

More Indigenous artists were hired due to this influx of programming, we commissioned two brand new theatrical works, saw the culmination of our first ever New Voices Playwrighting Residency, and our digital reach expanded far beyond our expectations and greatly surpassed our live theatrical reach over the past two live seasons.

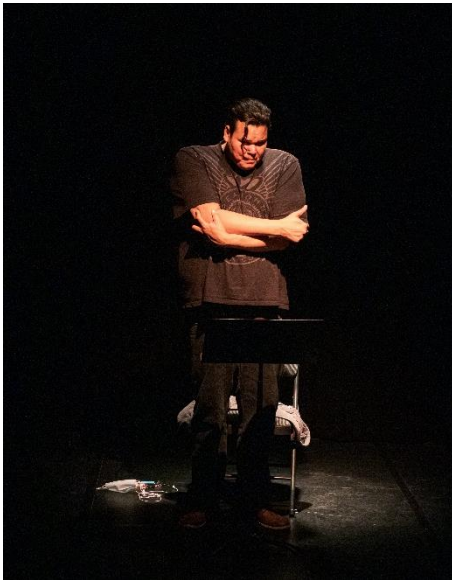
2020-2021 brought an immense amount of growth to GTNT which we will carry forward into our next season.





GTNT 2020-2021

FOREWORD



GTNT persevered and in some ways found greater success through the continued effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We were forced to pivot on a number of programs and productions in the interest of both public safety and the safety of our artists and staff. Despite these changes to our programming and operations, we were able to innovate and successfully create work for artists that reached further than we ever anticipated and our impact was felt across the country.

We are so grateful to our core funders including the Canada Council for the Arts, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, SKArts, SaskCulture with funding provided by Saskatchewan Lotteries, and the City of Saskatoon. We also received important project funding from Nutrien and season sponsorship from Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Authority (SIGA). We are, as always, proud of the support given to us from our media partners at the Eagle Feather News and the Missinipi Broadcasting Corporation and from our many private donors.



NĪPIN (SUMMER) 2020

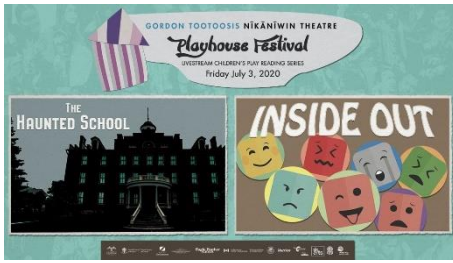
At this time the COVID-19 pandemic seemed as though it was on the way out so GTNT had begun preparing for a full return to normalcy with contingency plans in case of any developments in the wrong direction. Sadly, due to the untimely passing of the late Sophie Merasty, our planned production of Yvette Nolan's *The Unplugging* that was set to open our season in October of 2020 was postponed and eventually cancelled outright. Members of the artistic team and the staff were saddened to hear of her passing and decided it would not feel right to rush the production or produce it without the late Sophie.

Summer Speaker Series – (July – August 2020)



GTNT invited three artists to speak on a variety of topics related to theatre and activism: Dakota Ray Hebert, Donna Michelle St. Bernard, and Zoey Pricelys Roy. Each of these artists was invited to take part in a 1-hour livestream where they were interviewed by Jennifer Dawn Bishop on topics including the theatre industry, dramaturgy, telling your story, etc. These were highly successful in terms of drawing audiences considering their airing being in the middle of summer on Friday afternoons.

Performer's Playhouse Festival – (July 3rd, 10th, and 17th, 2020)



One of GTNT's engagement programs is the Performer's playhouse where we visit partner schools in the community and teach theatre skills to elementary school students from grades four to eight. Near the end of 2020, the program was abruptly cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We did, however, still have some written material from each of the classes who participated in the program. This writing was passed along to Nitanis Bear, a member of our New Voices Playwrighting Residency, who turned the material into five separate 10-minute-long plays intended for digital viewing.



We then hired Liam Scramstad as our digital technician to run a Zoom/OBS style production and we hired another five former Circle of Voices actors to portray the characters as scripted. Each script received a week-long rehearsal (half-days per script) and was performed over the noon hour on July 3rd, 10th, and 17th on Facebook. Each script was directed by Jennifer Dawn Bishop and artists were able to perform either from home or in our offices for those who did not have suitable internet or devices.



TAKWĀKIN (FALL) 2020

During the fall months, we began recruitment for the Circle of Voices program, laid the groundwork for contracting artists for the remainder of the season, and finalized space bookings for both our professional season and the Circle of Voices outreach program. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, we were unable to draw in new students from high schools for the Circle of Voices. Schools were hesitant to advertise out-of-school programs due to increased risk of COVID-19 infection.

Gordon Tootoosis NĪkĀnĪwin Theatre Horse Dance Ceremony – (Sept 7, 2020)



GTNT held a Horse Dance asking for a good future for our youth (Circle of Voices youth and alumni), the theatre company, the members, and funders, and especially the family members of the late Gordon Tootoosis. Due to COVID-19, the Horse Dance was a limited event and not publicized in any way to ensure a smaller circle. As background information, the former Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company received permission from the family of the late Gordon Tootoosis (founding member) to honor and include his name in the formal title of our theatre in 2015. The Tootoosis Family informed the theatre company that late Gordon was a horse man and worked with horses extensively. The power of the ceremony of the Horse Dance is important to the family and they requested that ceremony be held and Cree protocols be met. This was the second of four horse dances to be conducted in honor of Gordon Tootoosis by our theatre.



New Voices Play Readings (October 22nd to 31st, 2020)

Considering our cancellation of The Unplugging, we decided to increase the visibility of our New Voices playwrights by including their readings into our



first public production since March of 2020. Due to COVID-19 restrictions at the time, audience numbers were limited to a maximum of 12 participants per evening. As such, we nearly sold out the first half of our run. The second half, however, was cancelled due to several staff being designated as close contacts with a positive case of COVID-19. This production marked the end of our first Playwriting Residency Program and paved the way for the second iteration of this program later in the fiscal year. As a direct result of this program, we were able to create work for other artists earlier on in the year: this program helped to develop the skills of Nitanis Bear to the point where we felt comfortable hiring her to work on the Playhouse scripts in July of this year. We are hopeful that the future work of all our playwrights continues and that we can produce some of their works in future seasons.



MIKISKĀW (FREEZE UP) 2020

The Circle of Voices program began in November of 2020 and was shifted to be a digital program. We began with five students who were all previous COV members. Theatre skills, life skills, and cultural competency classes were delivered by local theatre practitioners, cultural advisors, and more via Zoom every Tuesday to Thursday evenings. The nutritional component of the program continued with groceries delivered to the students every Monday afternoon. The program carried on through to the end of May 2021 with the production of *Spirit World* being its culmination.

***Leave it to Weavers* by Dakota Ray Hebert, Ryan Moccasin, Danny Knight, and Maureen Belanger (November 10th – December 13th, 2020)**

When we began rehearsals for this production, COVID-19 cases were on the rise as we entered our second wave. Our first week of rehearsals was limited to Zoom which was an interesting challenge, but all artists involved persevered and worked through as best as possible.

Once in-person and rehearsing at Studio 914, we implemented mandatory masks for anyone in the space and physical distancing where possible. At this time audience capacities were still pegged at 150 seats or 30% of capacity, whichever was lesser, and mandatory masks had been reintroduced on November 6th to help combat increasing case numbers. We decided to reduce capacity to a maximum of 50 participants after our second week of rehearsal as we felt the need to increase safety for all artists and audience members. Shortly after making this decision, we were asked by our partners at the Broadway Theatre to limit capacity to a maximum of 30 people, which we were happy to do. Within a week of this decision, the Government of Saskatchewan mandated this exact audience size into law.

Sightline Designs filmed this production over three evenings to ensure we could splice together footage to create a solid digital stream for audiences who could not attend the show in-person. Three recorded streams of this production were held on December 16th through 19th and after the production on the 19th, the stream was left online until the end of Christmas Day so that families and individuals could watch the show on demand through the holiday



season. The production was streamed on both YouTube and Facebook free of charge in an attempt to increase viewership. The rationale for this choice was simple: throughout the darkness of the pandemic, we wanted to bring some light to the world. By instituting a financial barrier, we would be excluding potential low-income audience members.



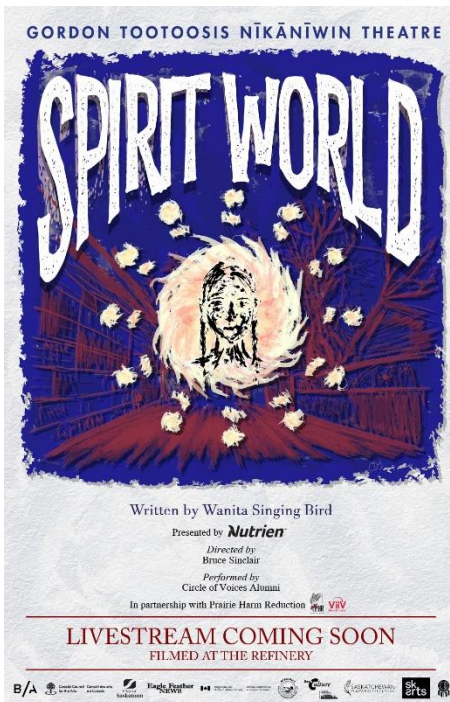
PIPON (WINTER) JAN/FEB 2021

During this period, GTNT finalized season preparations for the 2021-2022 season and began filming what would eventually become the Circle of Voices Open House sketches.



MIYOSKAMIN (WARM-UP) 2021

Spirit World by Wanita Singing Bird produced in partnership with Prairie Harm Reduction – March 15th – April 30th, 2021 (rehearsal period)



This year’s play was based on the life of Adele Cook, a northern Sask harm reduction icon. It was written by Wanita Singing Bird and dramaturgical services were provided by Curtis Peeteetuce. Rehearsals for our Circle of Voices production began mid-March of 2021 at La Troupe du Jour’s multipurpose room. By mid-April, we moved into the Refinery Arts and Spirit Centre. All personnel on-site had to wear masks at all times and physical distancing was kept as often as possible. As rehearsals continued, Saskatchewan’s COVID-19 situation took a major turn for the worse and we were well into our 3rd wave. Because of this, we decided to close our production to public audiences. We had already planned on filming the production for streaming purposes so we continued to move ahead with that plan. Filming of Spirit World took place on multiple days between April 27th and 30th. Due to some of the participants of the Circle of Voices wanting to take more time to focus on schoolwork, we had to reach out into our pool of artists to hire folks to take over some of the roles in the show. All actors involved in this production, with the exception of Kohkom Elizabeth, were COV alumni.

New Voices Playwriting Residency 2021



The 2nd iteration of the New Voices Playwriting residency kicked off with seven new participants in April of 2021. This year’s program also featured the addition of an upper tier of the program which welcomed back three previous participants: Nitanis Bear, April Rogers, and Risa Naytowhow. Dan Macdonald returned to coordinate both elements of the program. Both elements of the New Voices residency will continue through to October of 2021 where each participant willing to have their plays workshopped will be presented with that opportunity. This would include play readings for the public.



SĪKWAN (SPRING) 2021 – NĪPIN (SUMMER) JUNE 2021



Persephone Theatre Open Stage Live – May 20, 2021

Jennifer Dawn Bishop and Ed Mendez were approached by Persephone theatre to help curate acts for the second of their digital video presentations in early May of 2021. We submitted one of the videos created by the Circle of Voices students and connected Danny Knight and Shawn Cuthand to Persephone to have their work featured, and ensured that Kevin Wesaquate’s poem/video would be included. Jen and Ed filmed the introduction video in mid-May at the Persephone Mainstage and the complete work was released on May 20, 2021.

Spirit World by Wanita Singing Bird produced in partnership with Prairie Harm Reduction – May 26th – May 30th 2021 (streaming dates)

The recorded stream of Spirit World went live at 7:30pm each evening between May 26th and May 30th of 2021. In all, we had approximately 720 unique viewers which was a 79% increase over our 2020 live COV audience. While we were disappointed that the show could not be produced for a live audience, we take solace in its wide digital reach. For public health and safety concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic, GTNT made the difficult choice of closing the theatre season after this streamed production.

The production that was in place to close our season was *The Unplugging* by Yvette Nolan, again, but after so many hurdles, the energy was lost and we decided to cancel the production for the third time.



SPECIAL NOTE

Playhouse Program

Typically, GTNT would host our Playhouse Program from January to June each year. We visit five (5) partner schools in the community and teach theatre skills to elementary school students from grades four to eight. Sadly, due to ongoing concerns with the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to deliver this program in any capacity. Schools were very hesitant, and rightfully so, to allow outside facilitators in for programming.





SUCCESSSES

Increased audience

- Audience size increased by 290% over the 2019-2020 season and 197% over the 2018-2019 season due to increased reach from digital productions
- Collaborated with NAC Indigenous Theatre which increased our digital reach nationwide



Future Development

- Developed multiple new works
- Developed the skills of new playwrights through the New Voices program



HR Shifts

- Work from home greatly encouraged to ensure safety, and all staff/artists worked safely within ever-changing COVID-19 policies
- Frequent check-ins with staff and discuss work logistics to ensure staff were kept up-to-date.

NEW VOICES

The completion of our first iteration of the New Voices Playwrighting residency opened up a whole new area of artistry for the organization. By dedicating time to the development of playwrights, we have inspired the next generation of storytellers. We look forward to continuing this program in 2021-2022.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

Thanks to our previous experience with digital technology through Paris, SK, we were able to quickly pivot back to digital productions as the situation with COVID forced us to adapt to keep audiences safe. The viewership for both Leave it to Weavers as well as Spirit World were higher than their live audience numbers would have been by a significant margin!

NEW PLAY DEVELOPEMENT

The gamble of producing a new Christmas production rather than remounting one of the Rez Christmas Stories was worthwhile. The team of artists that came together to write it were wonderful to work with and the final product was a breath of fresh air for the theatre.

ADAPTATION

From an HR perspective, all staff managed to adapt as best as possible throughout the pandemic. It was not without its challenges as many of us were forced to work from home at various times due to various circumstances related to COVID-19 and other lift shifts. COVID-19 policies also continued to shift and change as the severity of the caseload shifted and changed which created added pressures on artist teams.

However, through all of these challenges, we managed to produce a season of programming in 2020-2021 which is more than many other theatres were able to claim. Beyond that, our 2020-2021 season saw increased individual engagement due to its digital delivery. We consider this a major success in continued visibility for GTNT.