

Reclaiming Hope

Outreach Coordinator Final Report

April 7, 2016

Overview

Reclaiming Hope was a unique project that came out of a political context of *fear*. How can we change our relationships to voices of fear that are compromising our relationships to each other and the environment?

The outreach process for *Reclaiming Hope* had many successes, and also came with some new experiences that I think the outreach team navigated very well. The following report outlines the outreach process from the beginning of the conception of *FREEDOM*, through to the manifestation of *Reclaiming Hope*, and the outreach process, along with some recommendations for future projects.

Shifting from *FREEDOM*

Starting in the fall of 2014, and into the spring and summer of 2015, I spent much of my outreach time networking for the *FREEDOM* project. *FREEDOM* was intended to be our main stage Forum Theatre production for 2016 – an audience interactive play about the shifts in Canadian values, as we have turned towards unbridled economic growth. When we prioritize the economy above everything else – what happens to human rights, and the environment?

Much of the conception of *FREEDOM* came from our own experience watching the Conservative government of Canada erode the country of human rights, labour rights, immigration laws, social services, and environmental rights. We wanted to use the theatre as a way to dialogue about the effects of these neoliberal laws on the Canadian psyche.

Throughout 2015, I spent the year connecting with communities about *FREEDOM*, trying to find participants with lived experiences in the issues, to be a part of the process to create and perform the play. One of the things that was challenging (but on the other hand made the outreach process very interesting and enjoyable), was that the way we had conceived *FREEDOM* (i.e. the impact of free market neoliberal capitalism on the Canadian psyche), was experienced very differently by each community we spoke to. For example, when I spoke to the science community, scientists raised the issue of primary science research that was actively being censored by the federal (and provincial) governments. When I connected with environmental (and other) activists, they raised the issue of Bill C-51, and the laws that infringed on freedom of speech. When I spoke to the immigrant community, concerns around Bill C-24, and the continuing eroding of basic citizenship laws.

The way that the outreach strategy had to shift on a regular basis, in order to engage different communities, ultimately meant that the project itself had a very loose focus. Something that we began to realize would be hard to put on the stage as a play. The story needed to have a focus.

The federal election in November 2015 also had an impact on the *FREEDOM* project. The election of a Liberal majority government, followed by the most diverse Cabinet appointment in Canadian history, followed by a number of other drastic changes (compared to the previous government), also meant that the political texture had shifted. Literally overnight, the censorship of environmental science research was lifted. The new government's proposed approach to engaging with First Nations was 180 degrees different than the previous government; and so while we don't believe that the new government will fix all the issues that *FREEDOM* was trying to raise, the political texture in the community had changed to the point where *FREEDOM* did not have the relevancy it did 6 months prior.

The attacks in Paris and Beirut, and the xenophobic responses towards Syrian refugees also added to the political context that we knew we needed to address.

We then made the decision to cancel *FREEDOM* – as a forum theatre main stage production with a play – and reconceive the project to address some of the issues that pertained to the original project, within the new political context.

I believe this speaks to part of the strengths of this model of doing community engagement that Theatre for Living has been doing for over three decades. The notion of being responsive to community – listening to what is happening in the community, and letting a project evolve if it becomes irrelevant.

Reclaiming Hope

While *FREEDOM* was intended to be a play about the impact of neoliberal policies that supported unbridled economic growth, *Reclaiming Hope* became audience interactive theatrical dialogue intended on investigating how we can change our relationships to voices of fear that are holding us back from making decisions that are good for our communities and the environment.

Booking Process

We decided to tour this audience interactive theatrical dialogue into different venues across Vancouver. The idea to go into different venues was predicated on the notion that by going into communities, we could reach further into communities. We ended up booking 12 events, in 8 venues across Vancouver.

We also decided to partner with one or more cohosts per venue. The reason we wanted to connect with cohost organizations, was that we hoped each cohost would bring out their constituencies, which meant that each event would have a different texture to it. This is part and parcel of our philosophy to root our work as deep in community as possible.

Very quickly (in less than 6 weeks), I had to book the community tour. This was one of the most enjoyable parts of the outreach process, as it gave me the opportunity to engage with a very diverse range of community organizations, to bring this dialogue to different communities. One of the small challenges we faced, was that because of the way that the project proposal was put together, some community organizations were concerned that it was “too political” (because it still mentioned the political context of FREEDOM, and Stephen Harper’s Conservative Government) – and (ironically), fears that the political nature of the project engaging issues of government, may compromise their charity status. It was an interesting issue to navigate with partners, as this is exactly what Reclaiming Hope intended to address.

In total we cohosted events with a total 20 organizations including (organized by event):

Aboriginal Front Door Society
Journeys Around the Circle
Native Education College
Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre

Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House

Kitsilano Neighbourhood House
Sierra Club BC
The Society Promoting Environmental Conservation

SFU Woodward’s

Check Your Head
Gen Why Media

Heartwood Community Café
Lighthouse of Hope Christian Fellowship
Our City of Colours
Out on Screen

Groundswell Café + Learning Space

The Social Justice Committee of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver
Critical Muslim Voices
Independent Jewish Voices BC

UBC First Nations House of Learning

Scotiabank Dance Centre: Two finale events hosted by Theatre for Living, without a partner

Outreach Process

Methodology and Strategy

Because the project itself was so malleable – in the sense that it was connected numerous issues and interests – there were many, many different demographics, sectors, and organizations that we could reach out to for *Reclaiming Hope*. We were able to connect with environmentalists, the immigrant community, the LGBTQ community, indigenous folks, people interested in social innovation and responsible business, to different faith communities. It was truly wonderful to see such diverse communities come to participate in *Reclaiming Hope*.

One of the challenges navigating the joint publicity and outreach efforts was the limited time that we had to activate the publicity and outreach schedule. Because of the change from FREEDOM to *Reclaiming Hope*, the publicity schedule was essentially already in place, while the booking of the tour was still happening. The intended joint effort of myself putting together a publicity and outreach strategy with the publicist didn't happen as thoroughly as I had planned, as I was in the throngs of other things when the publicity essentially ready to go.

One of the purposes of our partnerships we fostered with the cohosts was the idea of the different cohosts bringing out diverse constituencies. This was a success, as the audiences that came to *Reclaiming Hope* came from very diverse backgrounds, ages, and other demographics. A challenge we faced in regards to the partnerships though, was that because of the way that the relationships were fostered with cohosts (i.e. there was no monetary costs for the cohosts, as we wanted the events to be as accessible to communities as possible), there was less commitment in some ways, as there was no shared risk. This meant that in the actual process of promoting the events, the engagements and follow ups from the cohosts suffered. This also meant that some houses were very full, and some were very low – and it was very hard to predict, as there was complexity in gauging the efforts from cohosts.

Social Media and other Outreach Media

Social media was very minimal for this production. We used twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, and often boosted posts on Facebook. Facebook posts on our TfL page are challenging, because Facebook deliberately deprioritizes unboosted posts. It's almost pointless to post on facebook unless you are intending to pay to boost it.

We had some people who attended the event because they saw an Instagram post from Andrea Reimer. This might be a strategy for the next production – to have people with “social media clout” to repost posts for us on their accounts.

Because I am going to be editing the archival video for *Reclaiming Hope*, we also booked an interview before and after the run of the show. I was able to use the interview footage prior to the events, and edit them into small clips that we used to promote the production.

UBC Longhouse @UBCLonghouse · Mar 23
Tonight!

Theatre for Living @theatre4living
Tickets are still available for the #FINAL #community #ReclaimingHope event @UBCLonghouse w/ @EquityUBCV TONIGHT bit.ly/1QpNQbe

UBCEvents Calendar Retweeted you
Mar 21: Hey @UBCEvents - check out our #community #theatre event #ReclaimingHope Wed March 23rd @UBCLonghouse - tickets @ bit.ly/1QpNQbe

CJSF 90.1FM and 3 others followed you
Mar 22

CJSF 90.1FM @CJSF · Mar 22
Today on Spoken Word Surprise (alt Tues 4pm): the @theatre4living Reclaiming Hope interview! We'll be at the @UBCLonghouse March 23 730p

TicketTailor 0% Fees liked your Tweet
Mar 22: .@ChangingTheLens!! Come check out our new production #ReclaimingHope eventbrite.com/e/reclaiming-h... We will be @UBC TOM! pic.twitter.com/9TOU1SBGUO

Kathryn Stachyra liked your Tweet
Mar 21: People are LOVING #ReclaimingHope "Reclaiming Hope at Mount Pleasant Neighborhood House was great. Hope is way more

HeartwoodCC liked your Tweet
Mar 17: Avoiding #StPatricksDay madness? Join our interactive evening of theatre & community #ReclaimingHope @HeartwoodCC bit.ly/1QpNQbe

OUTtv Network liked your Tweet
Mar 24: Check out the great review for #ReclaimingHope from @OUTtv David C Jones outtv.ca/blogs/theatre-... Come see Reclaiming Hope April 1 and 2

Jamie liked your Tweet
Mar 23: We will see you tonight, #Vancouver for #ReclaimingHope! Last minute RSVP's being accepted until 6pm - bit.ly/1QpNQba

Lesley Sprague Retweeted you
Mar 23: We will see you tonight, #Vancouver for #ReclaimingHope! Last minute RSVP's being accepted until 6pm - bit.ly/1QpNQba

Vancouver BC Now Retweeted you
Mar 23: We will see you tonight, #Vancouver for #ReclaimingHope! Last minute RSVP's being accepted until 6pm - bit.ly/1QpNQbe
4 other Retweets

The left screenshot shows the 'THEATRE4LIVING' app interface with a grid of photos from various events. The right screenshot shows the 'ACTIVITY' page with columns for 'FOLLOWING' and 'YOU'. The 'FOLLOWING' column lists users who interacted with the app's content, such as 'thedancecentrebc liked your photo, 1d' and 'maryam_nourafshan liked your photo, 2d'. The 'YOU' column shows the app's own activity, such as 'thedancecentrebc mentioned you in a comment: Welcome to @theatre4living presenting "Reclaiming Hope" happening April 1 & 2 at 7:30pm at the Scotiabank Dance Centre #scotiabankdancecentre #theatre4living #reclaiminghope #theatre #vancouver 1w'.

Outreach Team

This year we had a fantastic outreach team. Tsatia Adzich was our community liaison/outreach assistant. She brought with her knowledge and expertise from her communications and First Nations studies background. Tsatia was in the office for two

days a week for the month of February and full time for March. Because of her connections to First Nations communities, she focussed much of her efforts on bringing First Nations communities and allies to *Reclaiming Hope*.

We also had an intern, working with us in the office once a week. The intern was a placement student from SFU's anthropology department, who was doing field research on NGOs. The research process proved to be a challenge in the office space. I believe I could have done a better job of navigating the transparency and consent process within the office. The intern produced very good work, however, the research component really changed the dynamic in the office, and I'm not sure if it was worth the extra help. I will have to rethink how to engage researchers in the future.

Voucher Program

As we do with all of our productions, we distributed vouchers to a number of social service agencies so that homeless or low-income folks could access the shows that were ticketed (the two shows at the Scotiabank Dance Centre). The responses to the voucher program was really great, and many of the vouchers were used.

We did get some feedback around the intensity of the event. Some folks from social housing found it challenging to fully participate. This has mainly to do with the intimacy of the topic and event – involving sometimes really personal and traumatic stories, which affect people differently.

The execution of the voucher program, including the wording on the actual vouchers was a very good success. Learning from the experience of the *maladjusted* tour voucher program in 2015, we communicated the voucher program and took RSVPs much more rigorously, and didn't run into any issues with the program.

Day of Concrete Action Planning

On April 3, after the run of the community events of Reclaiming Hope, we held a Day of Concrete Action Planning, which was a facilitated workshop day, where audience members who attended Reclaiming Hope were invited to come and find ways to take concrete actions back into the community.

While initially after the community tour of Reclaiming Hope we were sceptical about the Day of Concrete Action Planning, the results from the day were really great. The initial scepticism came from the fact that the majority of stories that were offered, were

interpersonal stories, that were not overtly related to the macro political issues. However, the workshop process really articulated a core philosophy of ours that we ironically overlooked in our initial scepticism – that the macro political issues are fundamentally linked to the personal. The personal is political.

We had 40 people attend the Day of Concrete Action Planning, and a variety of very concrete actions came out of the events, including:

- From a group on “Forgiveness”: A Reconciliation Choir
- From a group on “Racism”: A campaign featuring people of colour and allies, to create an educational video about racism, discrimination, and lateral violence
- From a group on “Internalized Misogyny and Climate Change”: establishing a youth group to address violence against women.
- From a group on “Getting Comfortable with the Uncomfortable”: A Facebook group to further explore and discuss “getting comfortable with being uncomfortable” and regular meditations around discomfort
- From a group on “Distribution of Wealth (Riches beyond Economics)”: Policy recommendations and report writing for decision makers, and a letter writing campaign

Final Conclusions

The overall outreach process of the project was a great experience, and successful on many fronts. While the changes in timeline made some things more challenging, the outreach team managed to pull off our outreach strategy pretty well.

Fundamental to the work that we do as a company, is the relationships that we build with community. Once again, we were able to connect with a number of grassroots organizations, using the theatre as a platform to engage diverse communities about social issues that come from community. The partnerships that we were able to foster with numerous community partners meant that the project could be rooted as much as possible in community. I am looking forward to further nurturing these relationships in our next project.