

Nakai's Niche: Local Stories are Global Stories

Thoughts of the northern region of our vast country, the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, often bring to mind images of limitless skies, expansive plains, small populations and, well, the cold; in many ways, images as diverse as you can get from a cityscape. What we don't often think of is a region burgeoning with cultural life.

Well, guess what – it is. In fact, the Yukon and Nunavut have a higher proportion of working artists than the Canadian average. From ArtCirq, a company from Igloolik, Nunavut that blends traditional Inuit culture with modern circus technique, to the Yellowknife Scottish Country Dancers - on any given night, just like in our country's major metropolises, this region is teeming with arts and cultural choice.

Perhaps it is surprising then that this region is home to only one PACT member company – Nakai Theatre in Whitehorse. Nakai, having recently reached the 30th anniversary milestone, has undergone a rebirth of sorts. Throughout Nakai's history there has been a strong focus on nurturing First Nations theatre as well as delving into important social issues such as homelessness, poverty, discrimination and cultural appropriation. Nakai's new mission is to broaden its scope while maintaining a focus on the development of local stories using methods that include, and yet extend beyond, playwriting in a style that Artistic Director David Skelton calls "developmental theatre". Through a focus on long-term development, David hopes to create outlets to grow a more dynamic audience relationship with the 23,000 residents of Whitehorse, allowing the audience to participate in the discovery and development of a piece each step of the way. So far, it seems to be working.

Like most places, Whitehorse's local stories are, more and more, becoming global stories. Whitehorse is a highly educated, cosmopolitan city with a younger generation that is inspired by global events and rapidly changing technologies and they're keyed in to a new esthetic and expectation from the arts. Sound familiar? Despite the special challenges, like isolation, that come with living in the North, many of the struggles that the members of the arts community there face are the same across the country: how do we best create work we are passionate about, that speaks to our audiences and that reflects or is relevant to the society we live in?

Nakai's programming and personal engagement style is trying to reflect the diversity and need for contact in its community and that is becoming its biggest asset. From, among other things, bi-weekly play readings, to the 24 Hour Playwriting Festival (the first of its kind in the country) to the Pivot Festival (a fringe-style feast of Canadian Theatre), Nakai is offering its community near constant engagement in one format or another. They are opting for intimate venues, site-specific events, and the inclusion of outside artists creating work that wouldn't normally be seen in Whitehorse.

Usually, the presence of great diversity leads a company to get more precise and specific in its outreach – to find a niche all its own. In this case, Nakai's niche has become diversity itself.

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