



Reflections on a cross-country collaboration in community arts training

In November 2009, Vancouver Moving Theatre and Toronto's Jumblies Theatre joined hands across Canada to present the Downtown Eastside Arts4All Institute—six days of learning, idea-sharing, films, panels, art-making, mutual support, and inspiration. Produced for the first time in western Canada, and specially tailored for the Downtown Eastside community, the institute provided an in-depth introduction to principles and practices of art that engage with and build community.

Host director Savannah Walling and lead artist and facilitator Ruth Howard joined forces to adapt an intensive course developed by Jumblies in Toronto over the past three years as part of the Jumblies Studio. The name 4All springs from a close relationship between this initiative and Jumblies Offshoot project, Arts4All, at Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre.

Joining Savannah and Ruth as facilitators were Canadian community play movers Terry Hunter (VMT), Varrick Grimes (Toronto/Newfoundland), Keith McNair (Jumblies), Cathy Stubington (Runaway Moon Theatre, BC), and Lina de Guevera (Puente Theatre, BC). Panels on forming community partnerships and making room for diversity reflected a spectrum of community-engaged arts as practiced by Judy Marcuse (ICASC), Rosemary Gergeon (urban ink), Bruce Ray (gallery gachet), Jill P. Weaving (Vancouver Parks Board), and others. Coordinator Susan Gordon organized nourishing lunches. Community partners included Carnegie Community Centre, Community Arts Council of Vancouver, DTES Heart of the City Festival, UBC's Humanities 101, Ukrainian Hall, and Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation.

Reflecting most community art projects, the twenty-one participants represented a diversity of backgrounds, skills, interests, and purposes. Most were local, but some arrived from other neighbourhoods, from Victoria, from Kamloops. All shared an interest in gaining skills and in processes that engage with community. Participants included veterans in the field wanting to revisit basics, challenge skill-set weaknesses, learn from and share with peers; professional and emerging artists wanting to engage more effectively with communities and learn how this differs from mainstream arts presentations; and others who've participated in a variety of arts-related community activities wanting to learn how to go about becoming professionals in the field.

Some wanted to put Downtown Eastside-created projects onto the road to share with friends and relatives, to shed light on realities of city life, and to inspire other communities to put on their own plays. Most had big or small projects in mind and were ready for tips and tools on project start-ups; on facilitation, communication, conflict-resolution, delegation; on preparing (and maintaining) budgets, business plans, and funding proposals; on forming partnerships; on assembling collaborative creative relationships; and on documentation, evaluation, and legacies.

Big questions were addressed. What do artists need to know to work successfully with community members on arts projects? How do we create projects accessible to diverse levels of experience, age, cultural and social backgrounds, and openness? How do we ensure that community-engaged artists focus on a community's real issues and understand that when we risk opening up old wounds with tough themes, we must ensure that these communities and individuals will be okay after we leave?

The energy and enthusiasm during the institute were contagious. Collaborations were great fun. Participants appreciated the diversity and willingness of people to be themselves, the respect and humour displayed throughout, and the shared wealth of resources and breadth of life and artistic experience. Everyone learned.

Savannah Walling and Ruth Howard

BIOS

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