



PACTcon 2024: Montreal

Event: Opening Event, May 29, 2024
Remarks: Executive Director Opening Address
Speakers: Brad Lepp, Executive Director, PACT

Good morning friends.
It is good to see you here.

I want to thank you for prioritizing this opportunity to come together. A conference like this represents a significant investment – in time, money, environmental impact, in energy, in emotions. Thank you. You being here is a radical act of saying to your peers that they matter, and that what we do together, matters.

I want to acknowledge those things we left behind – our families, our loved ones, our commitments - our inboxes, our seasons, and budgets, and board meetings, and difficult decisions. They will still be there waiting for you, but I offer the invitation to put those aside. Obviously do what you need to do, but I invite you to be present here, where you can. Take this time to re-engage, reconnect, and recharge, where you can.

I will be honest - This is not how I envisioned my first year of leadership would look. It has been a hard year for many of us. Hard in many different ways.

Professionally - I know for some - attendance is down. Donations are down. Volunteerism is down. Expenses are up - everywhere. Margins, that were always thin, have now evaporated, and can be wiped out with a virus, a snow storm, or a smog alert. Everything needs to go perfectly in order to just eek by, and we know that things never go perfectly.

And it is not lost on me, that within such a financially difficult year, this community came together and raised \$16,000 towards providing travel subsidies to ensure that more people were able to be present here this week. That feels powerful to me. A highlight of the past ten months has been being able to connect with many of you. Reaching out, asking if you've time for a virtual coffee. Many of you said yes. Some of you said yes and then stood me up.

And I've heard where you're at.

I've heard about feeling exhausted, but still ready to rumble.
About ambitious touring plans.
Ambitious building plans and absolutely smashing fundraising goals, and others that did as well only to realize it wasn't enough.
About building Multi-media empires,
about how new technologies are opening up ideas for your companies, new languages, and new touring opportunities.
About the work to be a more caring company.
About the need for space.
About new partnerships, with schools, and universities, hospitals.
About animating communities,
About centering Eco-responsibility into job titles
About the impacts of climate change on those performances.
About re-centering hospitality in our business, about how staff are going above and beyond to offer Surprise and Delight to customers.
About remarkable generosity from companies that have so little, but are asking how they can share.
About the weight of responsibilities - as employers that are trying to pay salaries and the bills, and the responsibility as stewards of legacies,
About generational divides, and thinking about how we treat the elders in our community. And how we treat new voices in our community. And how we nurture talent, especially outside urban centres.
And the need for space... did I mention that.

I honour that wrestling. And in all the conversations I had, I heard lots of questions about 'How'. I didn't hear many questions about 'Why'.
We know Why we do it. That corner stone remains solid – It is right that we pick it up from time to time and may examine it, but it is an anchor. We know what we do matters, and so the 'Why' is clear.

And within those stories you shared with me, We are all holding multiple truths. They can seem in contrast, and at times they are, but that is what we are being asked to do in this time and in this moment. And in that multiplicity, are the tensions we are navigating. And so, I'd like to share some of those pieces that I'm holding today.

I am thinking about the World Theatre Day message that was shared from Nobel Prize winner Jon Fosse, who wrote that *"art is about showing us what is different, what is foreign, something we cannot completely understand and yet at the same time do understand. And war, is about eradicating differences, leaving behind collective sameness. War and art are opposites"*.

I'm thinking of the words of Jani Lauzon, our Canadian World Theatre Day ambassador - *"I am craving a guarantee that we will continue to be curious, about ourselves. That we will still yearn for intellectual stimulation, and we will remain active in our pursuit of excellence as a human species, striving for love and acceptance only achieved when we better understand one another. This is what live theatre affords us - the opportunity to get to know each other"*.

I'm thinking about Seasons.

Not programming seasons, but embracing the wisdom of the rhythms of the four seasons. From the report on 'Decolonizing Granting Practices', We might acknowledge the significance of summer for productivity, while recognizing the winter as a season of rest and rejuvenation. How do these cycles align with responsibilities? When are we given permission to be impactful by doing less? Are we in Winter, or Is Winter Coming?

And I'm mindful of the quote from Paulo Coelho - that "Not all Storms come to disrupt your life; some come to clear your path".

Make no mistake, we have weathered storms, and we know there are more ahead. But I trust that there will be a season after this one.

I'm thinking about Silence.

Silence is not exclusively the domain of fear or condonement. Silence can also be contemplation, witnessing, gathering information, self-care, processing, de-centering, creating space, and can be an act of protest against simplifying an issue or reducing it to a false binary.

I think of all the ways of demonstrating care and witnessing to folks that we have seen - who have shown their compassion through acts of: educating ourselves, showing up, attending workshops, reading the news, donating funds, participating in demonstrations, writing letters, and reaching out to those who might be hurting.

I'm thinking of Trauma - collective social trauma, and individual, personal trauma. I'm thinking of family. I'm thinking of ancestors. I'm thinking of children. I'm thinking of those who have experienced violence, and those who willingly or unwillingly are doing violence. I think of how long that trauma lives in us, lingers, and is expressed in our bodies and our minds. How long it takes to heal.

How we are never fully aware of the trauma that each other are holding and going through. We don't know where the other person is at in processing things, or in recovery, or how our comments, however well meaning, can be deeply impactful.

And the role of art in that journey - feelings of catharsis. Feelings of being seen. Having our stories at last told to the world. Also Moments of distraction and joy and humour - those too have a role to play in healing.

I'm thinking about This moment we're in.

When it feels like we are living out a dark chapter in a history book. At a time of poli-crisis. And everything seems to be broken or on fire.

How I felt ready to step into leadership, and now spend so much time feeling uncertain, trying to take a step forward.

If we hold that theatre is political, then we need to accept diversity in that politic, and how it is held, and expressed. Whatever conflict is weighting on your heart right now – and there are many - I believe everyone in this room wants Peace, and that peace needs to be built upon Justice. It is the fallible, imperfect details of those two things that causes so much hurt and frustration.

I also don't believe anyone here wants PACT to be telling its members what to do or what to think.

I know this, that thirty years from now, in all likelihood, I would give everything that I have, everything, to be back here, at this age, in this state of health (such as it is), at this time (such as it is), wrestling with these issues (such as they are) with you. And perhaps 30 years from now I might have some more perspective, but perhaps not. This is the time we've been given, the context in which we are charged with to be leaders and create art for our community, with whatever means and resources we've been given.

I'm thinking about community.

The things that bring us together. I shouldn't presume that you were all drama misfits like me, but I know some of you were - Looking for a place to belong, to share our story. And community is messy – that is why despite more and more social media groups and algorithms, real community is an endangered thing. It involves showing up, authentically, generously, vulnerably, even when we disagree, and assuming the best intentions from everyone in the room.

There is a lot that divides us – but we should not expect uniformity. Rather than push you to be like me, I want to be curious enough to ask, to enquire, and let you be you. PACTcon should be a place to have difficult conversations. But can we have those while acknowledging the unknown trauma that each of us is holding. Is it possible to have a safer space? In a way that is not censoring but acknowledges that we are in a delicate space, all very Raw, and some conversations might need to find their right time and place. Can we have conversations about something specific, without it becoming about everything? Can we share our truths without triggering harm in others?

I need to believe so.

And can we share an invitation that if you need to remove yourself from a conversation for your own self-care, you can do that without judgement or assumption.

This is my first PACTcon.

I was speaking with Donna-Michelle St. Bernard last week, and she said, 'There is Always Crying at PACTcon'.

I've let that sit with me for a few days.

That is because we know what we do matters.

I look forward to the next four days together.

My commitment to you is to stay curious, to stay open, to have a sense of humour, and to stay hopeful.

Thank you.