

PACTcon 2024: Montreal

Event: Opening Event, May 29, 2024
Remarks: Region-6 Host Welcome Address
Speakers: Alison Darcy, Co-Artistic Director of Scapegoat Carnivale
Kathryn Westoll, Executive Director of Geordie Theatre.

Bonjour/hi! Welcome to Montreal /Bienvenue à Montréal! Region 6!

My name is Alison Darcy and I am the Co-Artistic Director of Scapegoat Carnivale.
My name is Kathryn Westoll and I am the Executive Director of Geordie Theatre.

We are so happy to finally be hosting you here in Tiohtià:ke (Montreal) after the pandemic spoiled our plans last time. Montreal is a super fun, diverse, artistic hub with many different people calling it home.

Right now, you are on the unceded territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) nation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Tiohtià:ke or Mooniyan (known by settlers as Montréal) has existed as a meeting place for many First Nation peoples, including the Abenaki, Atikamekw, Algonquin Anishinaabeg, the Huron-Wendat and others.

We also have a large Allophone contingent (those whose first language is neither French nor English).

As you extend out from the Island of Montreal into the larger Greater Montreal Area and then into the rest of Quebec, the number of Anglophone and allophone speakers reduces dramatically. In the Greater Montreal area; Francophones are 63% of the population, Allophones comprise 25% and Anglophones are 12%. As a comparison, Quebec City is 95% French, 3% other languages and 2% English.

Working in a minority language in Montreal has benefits and challenges. As you can see from being here, it is a beautiful city and the French culture permeates through the people and the cityscape - the vitality and creativity is evident. The great benefit for us is that we are steeped in those traditions of bold, abstract, poetic and physical theatre, which informs much of what we create. The French are also a very political people and so we are all a bunch of protesters and partiers that won't go down quietly. We riot when we win and we riot when we lose.

The flip side of that is that we lack representation when it comes to making the laws, and indeed some of those laws are created to protect the French culture from the influence of the English language which we obviously use in our practice. For example, we have to translate all of our materials for provincial and municipal funding and by law, if we reach a certain threshold of employees, internal communications and documents have to be offered in French first with permission given by each individual employee for English to be the language of choice.

There is also a glass ceiling to how far we can progress in our province and how much national attention we get because we are overshadowed by the work happening in French and in other disciplines.

Like the rest of the country, we have a shortage of TDs and SMs, our city is rapidly getting more expensive to live in and provincial and municipal funding is becoming less reliable. We have only three theatres with their own venue in Region 6 and the rest of us are nomadic, meaning we rarely have two shows back to back in the same location making audience returns difficult. After the pandemic, many spaces closed down and now we all fight, along with the French and other disciplines, for space.

While we do have divisions, we are moving into a fresh moment in our history as theatre makers in Quebec. French/English collaborations are on the rise. Translations of local English works are being performed on French mainstages and French companies are co-producing French plays in our English venues. And of course we share non-verbal artistic practices - circus, dance, clown. This is a new era for us.

In Montreal, we have a unique language - *franglais*. It is also becoming more and more acceptable among creative practitioners to speak English and be responded to in French by a colleague. We are creating bilingual spaces where we happily co-create, which makes the increasing language tensions projected by the political parties all the more mystifying.

Montreal is a great place for English artists to make their own work. But not a place to be nationally recognized. Honestly, you don't stay in Montreal if you want to be a celebrity. But you know, on the French side, it's quite different - you can see theatre actors on the cover of magazines at the grocery store - it's unfathomable.

There are 14 region 6 members, only one of which is not based in Montreal. We meet many times a year, often in person and are fortunate to consider each other allies. We

are incredibly supportive of each other's work and come together to fight for the sector when needed.

It can be weirdly lonely being an English theatre company in Montreal — we don't totally fit into the rest of Canada because we're actually quite deeply Quebecois, and we don't fit into this province because we're not seen as Quebecois enough. And, despite being a multicultural city, the overarching two-language conversation has led to a degree of separation along linguistic and racial lines.

We do have a lot to be proud of though: We have the longest-running black theatre company in Canada - Black Theatre Workshop just celebrated its 50th anniversary a few years ago. Geordie Theatre has one of the longest-running and farthest-reaching TYA touring networks in the country. Teesri Duniya is one of the first culturally inclusive theatre companies in Canada. Playwright's Workshop Montreal has been around for 60 years making it one of the oldest play development companies in the country. The FTA and the National Theatre School of Canada are located here, in fact, you are in an NTS building right now. Not to mention the incredible number of non-PACT associated artists creating work here. We also have a number of programs for emerging artists - ARTISTA (Imago), AMP (Black Theatre Workshop), and YCU (Playwrights' Workshop Montreal). And we have a massive amount of festivals! 900 in Quebec, more than 100 of which are in Montreal, most are in the summer. Unfortunately though, as many of you have probably heard, our beloved Just For Laughs festival, which employed a large number of us each July and brought international recognition and tourist dollars to our city, was cancelled this year.

We boast three English ASOs in Quebec (QDF, ELAN, QWF) and of course PACT nationally. On the French side, they have their equivalents: CQT (Conseil Québécois de Théâtre), and CEAD (Centre des Auteurs Dramatiques), but instead of one overarching organization like PACT they have four, each dealing with a different corner of the membership - TYA, commercial theatres, independent theatres, and institutional theatres. We use Equity, they use UdA. The one association we must use here is APASQ, while the rest of the country uses ADC for their designers.

We are in the middle of protesting the Quebec government's lack of investment in the cultural sector in the most recent budget - we haven't had an inflationary increase since well before the pandemic. All sectors of culture have come together to advocate loudly for an increase. We have had two rallies and anticipate another one in June. Our activism has moved the needle by 15% of what is being demanded. It's been a nice opportunity though for the different disciplines to merge with one goal in mind, since generally speaking we are quite separated between disciplines here.

We are lucky to have a pretty progressive and responsive city arts council in the Conseil des arts de Montreal (or CAM). While there is never enough actual funding to go around, they do support us and advocate for positive change in the sector. To that end, we're happy to say they've sponsored two of the sessions at this conference, one on eco-responsible practice, where Montreal companies are among the leaders, and one on accessibility, which is a major priority for the city. I believe they also sponsored our metro passes!

We have struggles, as everyone does, but the overwhelming feeling of living in this city is one of joy, excitement, art and culture. It is a rewarding place to be and create. And our voices and contributions to it are worth fighting for.

We want to end this by inviting you to buy tickets to the many shows that our Region 6 companies have going on right now, as well as FTA offerings from across the world. Tableau D'Hote's CARAVAN opened last night in this very venue, there is POTUS at Segal, a reading of Talisman's WILDFIRE on Saturday at the Segal Centre, and a reading of Teesri Duniya's Gaza Monologues on Thursday. All the info is in the schedule.

We really hope you get out and explore our beautiful city. The terraces open and there is enough smoked meat and bagels for everyone! And if you need some recommendations, please seek out Region 6 folks who are happy to give you some. Thank you so much. Have a great conference.