Collaborative Producing

by Ravi Jain

To answer a question about the future, I will speak about something I am doing in the present to address major challenges independent artists face, which I hope will shape the future. Of course, this present is shaped by the past, so in order to understand the present, let's start with the past.

The Past

Non–venue-based senior companies that were formed some twenty-five to thirty years ago (and I'm focusing here on Toronto companies such as Necessary Angel, Crow's Theatre, Nightwood, and Theatre Smith-Gilmour, to name a few) have gradually been given increases to their operating funds at the three levels of funding (municipal, provincial, federal). Of course, there have been times of government cutbacks, but on the whole their operating budgets have continued to grow based on inflation, the increasing costs of production, and their increasing volume of work. A company that received $20,000 in 1980 could receive $80,000 to $125,000 per year now (from just one of the councils). What is important to understand is that those companies are guaranteed the same amount they received the year before (except in the circumstances of not fulfilling their mandate or the aforementioned government cutbacks). So, with each annual budget, the councils must pay the senior companies first, and then whatever is left is available for new companies to receive operating funds.

Think of it as a pie. Once the people who get to the table first get their slices, there is very little pie left. What this means is that very few new companies are granted access to operating funds, and for those that are, $20,000—the point of entry for Ontario Arts Council funding—is not really enough to actually sustain your organization. (It helps, of course! But it isn't really enough to do much with.) Moreover, since there is so little new money coming into the system, that $20,000 will remain fixed at that level for a long time. That is to say, there will be no gradual increase over time. Councils often say that because there is no new money, that is, the pie isn't getting bigger, it is harder to fulfill the many requests from younger companies. And so these newcomers wait at the door.

The Present

Each year numerous new companies are formed because artists need to work. If they are not being hired by other companies, then they will make work themselves. They form companies, apply for grants, and hope to get funding to be able to pay for space in order to do their shows. Regardless of the artistic quality of the work, for most this is a losing venture, and often artists will incur personal losses out of their own pockets. With more and more companies being created, competition for funds and space is at a peak. Even more challenging is building the audience to come see the work. Senior companies sustain themselves (also arguably struggling to survive) by presenting one or two shows per year, making it difficult to sustain their audience's attention and their own growth while competing with venues presenting ten shows in a year-round season.

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The major challenges that independent producers face are the following:

- **Rising costs of production:** From materials to labour, everything is getting more expensive, and access to funding is more challenging. Moreover, it is difficult for independent artists/companies to access private donations or corporate sponsorships, and even senior companies are struggling with donor burnout.
- **Access to space:** With venue artistic directors programming more shows within their season, space is limited for rentals in the city. People are turning to alternative spaces and are forced to build an audience to come to those spaces rather than building on the audiences that already go to venues.
- **Audience-building:** With limited marketing budgets and often more "risky" forms of new work, it is difficult for independent artists to reach out to a large audience base. This is challenging because budgets rely heavily on box office revenues.

In trying to address these issues, we created a collaborative producing model that engages senior companies in a way that helps to reduce the financial risk assumed by emerging artists and makes those senior organizations more relevant to the community as a whole.

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These charts show the relative number of companies based on years of existence in relation to the distribution of arts council funding. Comparing the two pyramids indicates that the largest number of companies are newer and younger (as shown in the pyramid with the wide base at the bottom), whereas the wealth is concentrated at the top (as shown in the pyramid with the wide base at the top).
Image courtesy of Ravi Jain and Owais Lightwala

We asked ourselves, "If funders are struggling with 'no new money' to sustain new companies, how can we rethink how 'old' money is spent? How can senior-company resources be leveraged to support independent artists and build a healthier ecology for the theatre community as a whole?"

The RISER Project

The RISER Project brings together a community of senior leadership and emerging artists to support the artistic risk that independent artists must take in order to create art and innovate. The model is designed to maximize existing infrastructures by sharing resources, risk, and energy to reduce the producing burden on artists. RISER is made possible with the generous support of the Toronto Art Council's Open Door Program and the Department of Canadian Heritage.

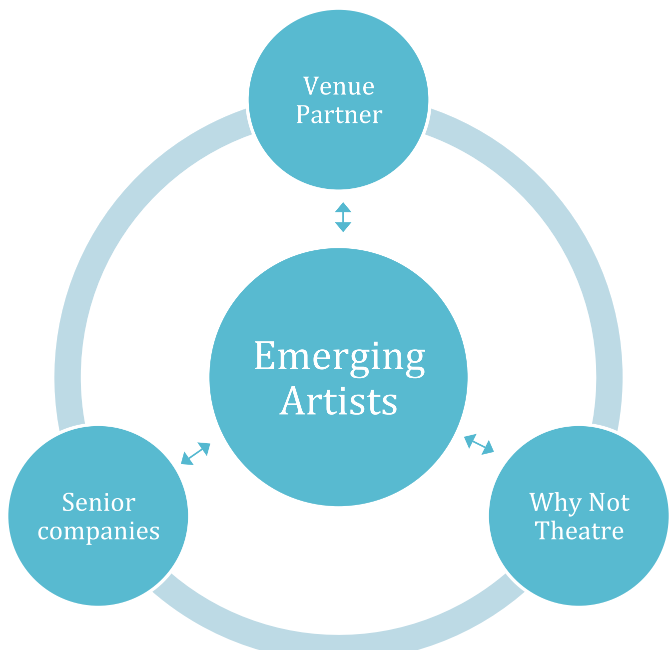
Our model moves away from the current independent theatre model toward an interdependent theatre model where the success of one is the success of many. This collaborative model shares the resources of money, space, and marketing in order to foster the development of independent artists, and it brings new energy and ideas to senior companies, helping them to expand their audience base and produce more work with small financial risk.

Who is involved:

- Three to five senior companies with twenty-five or more years in existence and an annual operating budget of at least $600,000
- A venue partner with access to a theatre building
- Independent artists with an idea they want to produce
- Why Not Theatre acting as facilitator and catalyst

How It Works, What We Did and Are Doing

In May 2014, our first year of the project, we supported three artists: Dan Watson, Nina Gilmour, and Viktor Lukowski with the support of senior company Theatre Smith-Gilmour. We presented three new plays over six weeks at the Theatre Centre in Toronto. Through the sharing of resources and with significant financial contributions from Why Not Theatre and Theatre Smith-Gilmour, we were able to lower each individual's production budget by 25 per cent, a reduction equal to approximately $12,000–$15,000, making their fundraising and box office goals more realistic and achievable. Moreover, our collaboration allowed us to apply for funding to support the model and created a wider base of people to support the marketing efforts to bring people to the show.



Mutually beneficial relationships—the structure can work to harness maximum support and mutual benefit; an interdependent theatre ecology.
Image courtesy of Ravi Jain and Owais Lightwala

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From *Mouthpiece*, created by and starring Amy Nostbakken and Norah Sadavah. The show was presented in year 2 of the RISER Project in April 2015 at the Theatre Centre. The play was a sold out success and has future tour dates in the works.
Photo by Brooke Wedlock, brookewedlock.com

Overall, the experiment was a success in that we created three new plays and ran them in repertory over six weeks, which is not the norm. Moreover, all of the artists were paid before the productions began rehearsals (which is rare in the independent scene). The financial risk of each production was assumed by Theatre Smith-Gilmour and Why Not Theatre (meaning that if box office goals were not met, those companies, not the artists, would pay for the loss). It is interesting to note that two of the three artists had never produced a show in Toronto. Those same two artists had previously been unable to meet box office goals. This confirms the need for emerging producers to be supported, or else it will always be a losing venture. The third play went on to have a second production in Toronto as well as a tour across Canada, making the project profitable for the artist.

In April–May 2015, our second year of the project, we are bringing together four project-based artists: Amy Nostbakken, Daniel Karasik, Tara Grammy, and Adam Paolozza. Each had planned to independently produce their shows in the 2014/2015 season, with individual show budgets ranging from $25,000 to $30,000.

In our second year, we received a grant from the Toronto Art Council's Open Door Program to further explore this model. With those funds Why Not Theatre paid for all of the production expenses for each company (rehearsal and performance space, technicians, lighting designer, publicist, production manager, technical equipment, production support), at a value of approximately $10,000 per show, whereas if the artist was doing it on their own it would cost approximately $15,000. Thus, our model is more efficient in that we save approximately $5,000 per show in the sharing of space, labour, and resources. That is a total savings of $20,000 in efficiencies. The artists are responsible for all artistic fees, which they will raise through project grants and other achievable fundraising goals.

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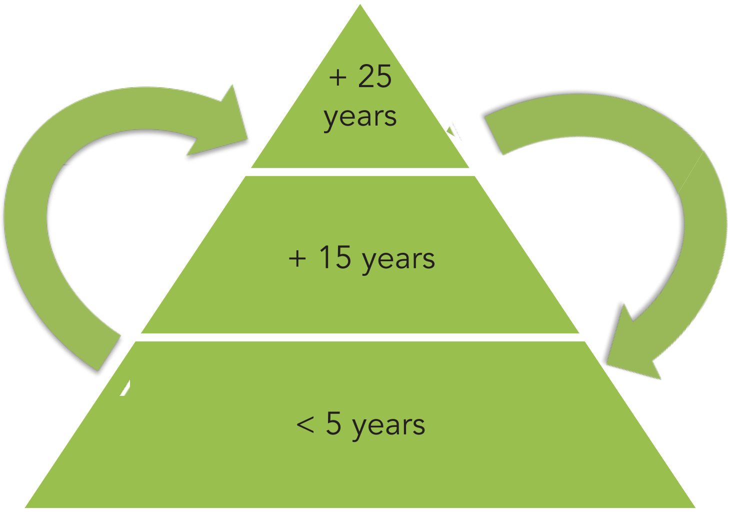
Beyond the financial incentive, the keystone of this model is relationships. Not only are we building a relationship with the venue, but we also brought three senior companies to the table: Necessary Angel, Nightwood Theatre, and Fu-Gen Theatre, all of whom are investing cash or in-kind space and services. Not only will their investment see box office returns, but it will also incentivize them to promote the shows through their networks. An added bonus is that we are fostering an important relation-

From *Ralph + Lina*, developed in the first round of our producing-model exploration. Created by Ahuri Theatre, starring Dan Watson and Christina Serra. The show exceeded box office goals, received five Dora Award nominations, and went on to be remounted in Toronto as well as touring in Ontario and the Yukon. Our model and contribution played a major role in their success.
Photo by Lacey Creighton, laceycreighton.com



If we change the distribution, that is, if there is a way to incentivize the senior companies with the most money to invest the funds in companies at the base of the pyramid, there will be more opportunity for money to flow within the ecosystem. There will also be less need for artists to form new companies.
Image courtesy of Ravi Jain and Owais Lightwala

ship between the companies in the hopes that one or more of the senior companies will produce one or more of the shows in their upcoming seasons.

Most senior companies develop work, and often an artist's work can stay in development for long periods of time. Our model incentivizes senior companies to invest in the *productions* of artists, which in our experience leads to the opportunity for longer-term collaborations. Think of it like on-the-job training versus school.

Last Year

The Canada Council cut the funding of the top companies, reducing their operating budgets by 5 per cent to create pools of funding for emerging companies. As helpful as that may be, it isn't solving the major funding issue, which is, as already stated, that the concentration of wealth is still at the top and the entry level does not have sufficient room to grow. If senior companies can be incentivized to invest their money "down," then we will see a different kind of economy within the arts sector. If venues programmed one less show in their ten-show season and invested in this model, for one third of the money they would have spent on that one show, they could support three or four new shows and a wider base of artists within the ecology. This would also make venues more dynamic, make room for more risk, and, most important, create opportunities for multiple voices and perspectives to be heard.

Our theatre ecology needs the same concern we all share for our climate. Major changes now could save us from a major disaster later.

Historically, companies are formed out of disaffection with what is happening in the mainstream, or because of a lack of opportunities in established venues or with senior companies. We have inherited a "Fuck it. I'll do it myself" attitude, and this speaks to why so many companies are formed in the first place. Artists make their work in order for it to be seen, and they are forced to create opportunities for themselves outside of the exclusive curation of the artistic directors. Our model addresses this problem by keeping the artist at the centre (the artists select their collaborators, venue, and partners), which allows the opportunity for new leaders to emerge.

The Future

A lot of changes are coming at all levels of funding. The ground is shifting, and everyone is trying to address the problem in their own way. I can't give a prophecy for the future, but I can make change today, which will impact tomorrow. Our model addresses how things could be done NOW. In an economy where there is no new money, we are creating a way where big change can happen with small investments. We see that this kind of change is possible in many other sectors, particularly in the charitable/non-profit sector, so we know it can work.

I know that this producing model will evolve with time, and we are currently only in our second year; however, in the future, I would like to see groups of companies putting in applications to fund this model. Three or four companies working in collaboration could secure investments from senior companies and a venue partner and apply for a grant of $20,000 to fund their model (rather than each applying for $15,000). This reduces competition

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at the funding level, encourages collaboration, and, most important, puts the independent artists in control of their careers in a way that is supported and set up for success.

The overall outcome of this is to create a healthier theatre ecology and stop the historical inheritance of "doing it on your own." We see major structural problems with the distribution of wealth in our own economy, so why does our arts funding mirror the same flawed practice? If we reward investing money in the base of the pyramid, we create a culture where we want the base to flourish, and their success benefits those at the top.

The arts economy is one that can sustain itself only through collaboration and understanding of its interdependent relationships. We need to think of it as a delicate ecosystem or a machine with interconnected parts. Our theatre ecology needs the same concern we all share for our climate. Major changes now could save us from a major disaster later.

I want to be clear that we haven't figured out all the solutions, and we are working through many kinks in the model. This article is really about sharing where we are at and what the philosophy of our approach is. I look forward to being able to share more with you as we evolve.

About the Author

Ravi Jain is a multiple-award-winning actor, director, producer, educator, and arts activist and is artistic director of Why Not Theatre. Directing credits include *A Brimful of Asha*, *The Prince Hamlet*, *I'm So Close* (Spotlight Award, SummerWorks 2008), *Fault Lines Triptych* (Governor General's Literary Award for Drama written by Nicolas Billon), *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (Soulpepper), and *Like Mother Like Daughter* (Why Not/Complicite).