

Shutdowns and resilience in Toronto's arts & culture sector

Businesses across the country have been reeling from the economic consequences of physical distancing policies put in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19. While few organizations remain untouched, one of the most impacted sub-sectors in the entire economy has been arts, culture, recreation, and sports. Their shared role in bringing people together is what has put them collectively at risk.

Statistics Canada surveyed more than 14,000 businesses and nonprofit organizations on the impact of the shutdown.¹ It found that arts, entertainment, and recreation organizations were the second most likely sector of the economy to report revenue declines of at least 20%. Two in three (67%) reported revenue declines of 20%, only slightly exceeded by the accommodation and food services sector, where 73% reported declines of similar magnitude.

On the nonprofit end specifically, many have had to cancel their in-person events permanently. A recent survey by Imagine Canada on charities found that 32% of arts, culture, and recreation organizations have permanently or temporarily ceased operations, compared to only 18% of charities overall.² In Toronto, countless organizations have made massive shifts, ranging from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra canceling the rest of its season,³ to the closing of major museums and art galleries, to the City of Toronto announcing the cancellation of all major events and festivals until at least August 31st.⁴

This has resulted in unprecedented financial distress. While revenue models vary for arts organizations, more than half (53%) of the income of performing arts organizations (theatre, dance and music companies) comes from admissions, rentals, bars, parking, and other fees,⁵ according to a survey of members of the Canadian Association for the Performing Arts. And many of these are now out of pocket as upfront expenses for now-shuttered performances will not be offset by ticket sales and sponsorship revenues.

Workers in the arts among the most impacted of any workers

Not surprisingly, arts workers have suffered the consequences of layoffs, unrenewed contracts, and reduced hours. As of May 2020, about 130,000 people worked in the arts, culture, and recreation sector in the Toronto Census Metropolitan area (CMA), representing about 1 in 20 workers (4.2%).⁶ While it remains to be seen how arts, culture, and recreation organizations will fare over the summer, this represents a 24% decline in employment from July 2019.

Those who've managed to keep their jobs have seen their hours reduced dramatically. Of the 50 occupations that Statistics Canada reports on monthly, 3 of 10 with the biggest decreases in hours in May versus February were occupations in arts, culture, recreation, and sport.⁷ On average, these occupations had their hours decline by 38% versus 18% for the typical occupation.

These declines in employment occur even as most organizations in this sector are accessing government wage subsidies,⁸ where up to 75% of salaries can be covered, up to a maximum of \$847 per week per employee. With the current plan to end the subsidies in August, prospects for arts and culture workers look bleaker still.

Pre-COVID-19 Toronto Foundation's 2019/2020 Vital Signs report pointed to the fact that arts and culture workers have one of the highest rates of poverty of any sector, with particularly high levels of precarious work.⁹ In the Toronto CMA in 2015, the average worker in this sector made only \$23,926 in median income, almost half the median income of workers as a whole. For key groups of workers, the reality is even starker. Racialized artists in Canada have median total incomes 28% less than non-racialized artists, and female artists earn 18% less than male artists.¹⁰

In the wake of the pandemic, arts funders stepped up, including the Toronto Arts Council, which created a pot of \$1000 emergency funds supporting individual artists in the city, flowing quickly and in advance of the federal Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB).

It is worth noting that at \$2,000 a month, CERB pays more than the typical artist in the city makes in an average month. "From what I've been told by younger artists, getting the CERB is the most financially secure they have ever felt," says Philip Akin, artistic director of Obsidian Theatre, the largest culturally diverse theatre company in the country.

Arts and culture organizations innovating despite the challenges

And yet the pressures and deprivations have not curtailed creativity. Many arts organizations have found alternative formats to produce and share their work. The Toronto Public Library has kept people's access to books going through curbside delivery, while Hot Docs pivoted to a fully online and ticketed film festival. Toronto organizations have also been leaders in drive-through experiences, including a Van Gogh exhibit and the Toronto Zoo's Drive-through Safari, both attracting substantial audiences.

Many others have managed to deliver their content online, including a group of Toronto arts organizations that came together to launch Arts@Home, a free digital platform. These mostly large participating organizations have been able to maintain relationships with their core audiences and reach new ones too. This means Canadians can still get access to high-quality arts content, but it depends entirely on government funding. Flexibility from the arts councils (Toronto, Ontario, and Canada Councils) has enabled this shift to virtual programming, but the decline in earned income will leave a significant hole.

The Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts (ANDPVA) shifted to online programming early in April. With support from the Toronto Arts Council, they launched the Writers' Room Watch Party on Facebook with Susan Aglukark. Susan sang and had people around the world dancing. At a subsequent virtual event, noted playwright Cliff Cardinal read from his new story. ANDPVA is expanding its online programming to showcase the work of Indigenous artists, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers and pays them \$1,000 for new works or old, i.e. oral traditions and storytelling.

The federal government has announced new funding streams nationally that will also play a role in aiding recovery for some organizations, including a \$500 million fund for cultural, heritage, and sport organizations.¹¹ The City of Toronto has approved tax relief for organizations with venues and has announced funding of up to \$25,000 for festivals that were impacted by COVID-19.¹²

Of course, not every organization can pivot online successfully, a particular challenge for smaller organizations with less permanent human and physical infrastructure. But size notwithstanding, for performing arts companies, the live experience is central to who they are and what they do. Obsidian Theatre, as one example, “has completely shut down,” according to Akin. Given the critical role the company plays in showcasing theatre by Black artists, the gap this leaves is significant.

Umair Jaffar, executive director of Small World Music, noted similar issues for their organization. Small World Theatre helps highly skilled immigrant and refugee musicians enter the job market and typically hosts 150 concerts a year and two festivals in Toronto. While they are finding ways to put as much of the content online as possible, there are substantial limitations, according to Jaffar. For the musicians they help, “they don’t have access to a good camera, audio equipment or fast internet,” to effectively perform online. They are doing what they can to access the needed equipment, but funding is a barrier. Jaffar notes that for smaller organizations like theirs, their ability to promote their artists effectively in a crowded digital environment is another huge obstacle.

Small World Music is looking at other new outlets to help those they support. “We are pivoting our theatre and recording studio into a social distancing friendly recording studio. We are taking out the seats in the theatre. We are creating a 1000-foot recording studio so a band could be in one room in separate booths and all remain distant,” explains Jaffar. Their recording studio charges a fraction of what other professional studios charge, allowing immigrant and emerging artists to get their work produced. But much of what they are doing requires support in order to scale.

For other organizations, technology is a barrier for participants and audiences as well as for the artists themselves. Vivine Scarlett, the executive director/curator of dance Immersion, who supports and assists with the training of dancers in styles of the African Diaspora, points out that “In certain communities, many people do not have a computer with internet. They may have internet on their phones, but cannot participate in the same way. This limits the participation of approximately half of the youth we work who can participate [in online discussions].”

Culture-specific arts organizations are uniquely challenged

For arts organizations working in the Black community, like Obsidian Theatre and dance Immersion, the last few weeks have been particularly challenging, both personally and professionally.

Dance Immersion has been working on translating some of its programming to an online platform, but Vivine Scarlett shares that “it’s just not the same.” She explains that face-to-face connection is a big part of the work. “Participants want to touch base with each other, not just about the art, but also on issues as people of African descent,” she adds.

Organizations like Obsidian Theatre and dance Immersion play a rare and essential role sharing the stories of Black people in the city and bringing the community together. Heightened awareness of systemic racism underlines their critical function in giving voice to community but it also brings added responsibility. Physical distancing makes their job that much harder.

Philip Akin of Obsidian Theatre highlights why a culturally inclusive arts scene is vital for the city writ large: “Just because there is a Black person or an Indigenous person on the deck, their stories are still universal. If we want to grow as a people, you have to engage with everything that is around you.”

While the issues of the pandemic are front and centre right now and support is needed immediately, some organizations serving the Black community and other cultural groups think that there is room for improvement in how their work is funded in the long-term.

Vivine Scarlett underlines a structural challenge whereby lack of infrastructure often precludes them from accessing significant funding. “We don’t have the infrastructure because we don’t have the funds,” she says. “We have been at a disadvantage, and it’s hard for us to catch up.” According to Umair Jaffar of Small World Music, part of the challenge is that their groups are considered grassroots, and therefore not mainstream. “But most people in Toronto are immigrants,” he says. “How is that not mainstream?”

Arts organizations need guaranteed support to figure out how to plan for the long-term

Canadians believe that the facilities that house arts, culture, and recreation activities will likely be the last to reopen.¹³ In a survey in early April, Canadians indicated that arenas for sports and concerts and theatres were the last thing that should reopen of a list of common activities. For the organizations that rely on these spaces to operate, the difficulties will be long-term, and governments, funders, and philanthropists will need to strategize on the best ways to support these organizations as they come back.

Venues will open up again, but in the meantime, the organizations that animate them need both life support and the ability to plan and prepare for a strong return. It is impossible to imagine Toronto without its rich diversity of arts and culture activity. As employers, connectors, storytellers, and contributors to Toronto’s economy, the arts and culture are not only an anchor sector in the city but a crucial part of the pandemic recovery too. Physical distancing has put a sharp focus on what we lose when we’re apart, including our access to the healing power of art. As we build back better, a strong and inclusive arts and culture sector will lead us to greater social cohesion.

- ¹ Statistics Canada, 'Canadian Survey on Business Conditions: Impact of COVID-19 on Businesses in Canada, March 2020', *The Daily*, 29 April 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200429/dq200429a-eng.htm>.
- ² David Lasby, 'Charities & the COVID-19 Pandemic', May 2020, https://imaginecanada.ca/sites/default/files/COVID-19 Sector Monitor Report ENGLISH_0.pdf.
- ³ Garnet Fraser, 'TSO Cancels the Rest of Its Season Due to COVID-19 | The Star', *Toronto Star*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/music/2020/04/14/tso-cancels-the-rest-of-its-season-due-to-covid-19.html>.
- ⁴ Lauren O'Neil, 'Toronto Just Cancelled All Major Events and Festivals until August 31', *blogTO*, May 2020, <https://www.blogto.com/radar/2020/05/toronto-just-cancelled-all-major-events-and-festivals-until-august-31/>.
- ⁵ Canadian Association for the Performing Arts, 'Performing Arts Presenters and the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy - CAPACOA', 16 April 2020, <https://capacoa.ca/en/2020/04/performing-arts-presenters-and-the-canada-emergency-wage-subsidy/>.
- ⁶ Statistics Canada, 'Table: 14-10-0300-01 Actual Hours Worked by Occupation, Monthly, Unadjusted for Seasonality', accessed 22 June 2020, <https://doi.org/10.25318/1410030001-eng>.
- ⁷ Statistics Canada.
- ⁸ Lasby, 'Charities & the COVID-19 Pandemic'.
- ⁹ Toronto Foundation, 'Toronto's Vital Signs: Growing Pains Amid Narrow Gains Report 2019/20' (Written by Steven Ayer on Behalf of Toronto Foundation., 2019), <https://torontofoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/VitalSigns2019.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ Hill Strategies, 'Demographic Diversity of Artists in Canada in 2016 | Hill Strategies Research Inc', 29 January 2020, <https://hillstrategies.com/resource/demographic-diversity-of-artists-in-canada-in-2016/>.
- ¹¹ Government of Canada, 'Support for Canadian Heritage Grants and Contributions Recipients during the COVID-19 Pandemic - Canada.ca', 15 May 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/funding/information-covid-19/canadian-heritage.html>.
- ¹² 'COVID-19 May 29 Update', *Toronto Arts Council*, 29 May 2020, <https://torontoartscouncil.org/news/covid-19-may-29-update>.
- ¹³ Angus Reid Institute, 'Perpetual Pandemic: Canadians Say Post-COVID-19 "Return to Normal" Is Far Off', 15 May 2020, <http://angusreid.org/covid19-reopening-plans/>.