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Vern Thiessen: Hello everyone, I'm Vern Thiessen I'm the artistic director of Workshop West Play rights theatre and the Canoe Festival 2015. I want to welcome you to our salon series here at Canoe. Today we've been talking about Get out Of the theatre was our first salon. Our second salon was, 'Where Does the Play Start?' Which was a discussion about immersive theatre. Now we're moving on to salon three, which is called Why Can't I Get In?

We're going to have a discussion today about the Edmonton scene and how to shift the diversity and the narrative towards accessibility and diversity in Edmonton and across Canada. I'm going to turn it over to Brooke Leifso who's here today doing double duty. First of all as our patron's relations manager with Workshop West and the Canoe Festival, but also an artist in her own right with My Tie Collective.

So, Brooke, take it away. I'll get you to introduce our guests and to start to discussion.

Brooke Leifso: Great. I'd like to introduce our guests in order. I guess I'll go clockwise. Christine Frederick.

Christine Frederick: Just one.

Brooke Leifso: Just one. With Alberta Aboriginal Art. Kelsie Acton who is a disability and performance academic, as well as an artistic associate with CRIPSiE. And Chris Dodd who is a local actor, who is deaf.

Is everyone okay how I identified you?

Kelsie Acton: Yes.

Brooke Leifso: Good. I just wanted to confirm. And for myself, in this particular space, I am a white settler crip artist. I am also a community facilitator, so some of my questions and how I'm facilitating come from that space of inexpression and feminist theory. If anyone has any questions about that, I'm more than happy to have conversations about it later.

How I'm thinking it will work best, is I just have a series of questions, and they're up to everyone. And you can answer in order, how you like. The first one is, what is your honest experience of the theatre community in Edmonton? Or Canada? In this context.

Christine Frederick: Well I can start, certainly. My experience thus far is running approximately 35 years. The initial onset... Certainly just being

included, in any way, in the theatre community was wonderful. But within a few years realizing that the roles that I was getting were not reflective of my heritage in any way. Being Métis, I suppose I can play a lot of different characters. Different ethnicities, I suppose.

Also when I realized in my late 20's that any aboriginal character I played, they were only either a Pocahontas, doe-eyed, Annjenué kind of character, or the total other end of the spectrum... A whore, hooker, drug addict. That kind of thing. In terms of my honest theatre experience, once I started reflecting on what I wanted to see on stage, and what I wanted to play on stage, I realized that there was a huge void. I'd like to say that's changing now.

Brooke Leifso: Okay. We'll come back to that. Within the context of CRIPSiE, I was working as a dance artist when I started to work with CRIPSiE and quickly fell in love. That took over my world. I suddenly realized that most of the theatre spaces are not meant to be theatres. The reclaimed spaces that are totally physically inaccessible. The venues that were financially assessable that I booked as an independent theatre artist, or a dance artist, were not available to me.

A lot of the major arts festivals that emerging artist's think of such as NexFest, the reason why we can't get in, is we literally can't get into the building. Or we can't get onto the stage, if we can get into the building.

I also see things of culture and education. theatre has a very particular culture and set of understandings about how things work. If you're working with people who've never had the privilege of accessing that information through university, or even through community theatres, there's a big culture gap to be bridged and a lot of educational work to be done on both sides. Because sometimes the cultural requirements of theatre are things that we just can't meet.

Chris Dodd: As a deaf artist, I've been involved in the theatre community for quite a time. I've been acting since I was in my teens. I graduated from the University of Alberta with a drama degree. I was the first deaf person to graduate from my program. I thought having a theatre degree might open doors for me. I might be able to be involved in the community in that way.

But I found upon graduating that the roles for people who were deaf. For deaf characters, or opportunities for deaf people. They were very slim. One of the issues is that there are very few scripts out there that actually feature a deaf actors, that require a role for and a person who was deaf. If I were to be involved in a production, I would be, in a sense, pretending to be a hearing person. Or be a deaf person on stage, but I wouldn't be represented myself. I would be representing a role in which I'm hearing.

Of course that's always been a challenge for me, because my speech is not as good as other people. I can do those roles, but I would prefer to represent someone that was more genuine, that was more true to nature. And not need to disguise the fact that I am a person with a disability. I am a person who's deaf.

So in my experiences in working with community, it's really the best opportunities is the opportunities that you make yourself, and for writing your own scripts and getting together with like-minded people. Other people who you are in the same circumstances with you. And taking initiative for your representation.

Brooke Leifso: Great. Thanks. This is where I also want to bring it out to the people who have come. If you want, there's a spare mic, if anyone else has shared experiences they would like to share. I'd like to welcome that. I don't want to take a lot of space with it, but I wanted to recognize that although I brought and curated together this group, that other people also experience modernization. I just want to give a couple minutes, if someone wants to come up and share.

Going once? Okay. Thank you for sharing, and starting it off in a really honest, good and somewhat hopeful space. What I was hearing is that the two actors in the room that you're often pinpointed into particular roles that cater to mainstream ideas of either disability, or indigenous culture in Canada. Am I hearing that right?

Christine Frederick: Yeah. For myself, often times when I'm talking to the public about things like access, or the indigenous experience in art, one of the things I talk about is, what are your cultural expectations? There's a lot. A lot of that has been perpetrated by Hollywood, and the idea of sort of this either pan Indian view, or the two characters that I mentioned to you.

The idea of who is setting the cultural expectation is really important.

Brooke Leifso: Okay. I do have questions here, but I'm just going to facilitate. So, who's setting it?

Kelsie Acton: Mainstream.

Brooke Leifso: Who's the mainstream?

Kelsie Acton: People in power. People who have established theatres, people who... Not even that. A common person, just walking through the streets. For example, I deal in the arts not just in theatre, but also in visual arts and other kinds of art forms. I hosted a tee pee at the Works Art and Design Festival, and what we do, we have the tee pee there because it's a piece of art design.

Then also we would have in there emerging contemporary work. So, photographs, paintings, things like that. And there were actually a number of people who came to me visibly disgruntled because when I approached them and asked them, "Why?" They were upset. They said they expected me to be wearing regalia, cooking bannock, and I just kind of looked at her and said, "Well, why do you have that expectation?" She was just an ordinary woman, a little bit on the older side, and gratefully she was playful in that she engaged in this conversation with me. Some people might just shut down and go, "I'm not talking about that."

And she tried so hard to determine where she got that expectation from. I even played with her, I said, "Right next to me is an installation from Montreal. Do you have the same expectations that they would be dressed as voyagers and eating poutine? And she looked at me like, "That was absurd! Ridiculous!" Then when I said, "Well then, why is it that you have that expectation of me? And then further, where do you think that comes from?" And I could see the wheels going in her, and I'm so proud of her because she really did try to identify it for herself.

And I said, "You know, it's fair that you don't know the answer." I said, "The other question I have for you is, do you think it's appropriate for you as a non-indigenous, or non-aboriginal person to be qualifying or quantifying the expressions of indigenous culture or artistry?" And I was so proud of her because she said, "No. It's not appropriate."

Whereas two minutes before, she was going full bore and doing that very thing. It is in fact all of us that are setting the cultural expectations and it's not until we actually use our critical thinking, and try to answer those questions, that we come to any understanding of that fast subject, I guess.

Brooke Leifso: You brought up a lot, there.

Kelsie Acton: I do that.

Brooke Leifso: It's fine. I can jump around in questions, and go with the flow. I feel like what Kelsie brought up is a lot of structural issues, which are really valuable. But I'm also wondering if Chris has any things he wishes to share about barriers.

Chris Dodd: Well I just want to comment on what you're talking about, labeling, I found that comment interesting. When people meet somebody who is deaf, they have this expectation that this person cannot communicate, or this person maybe doesn't have the ability to speak and this is a common stereotype. Sometimes when people meet me they say, "Wow, you speak really good. I didn't expect you to be able to speak to me." That kind of stereotype or expectation, so labels, not only for aboriginal people but for people with disabilities you meet someone. I kind of feel like I

can expect . Not only for a you meet someone who has this expectation, then this person has a limitation, this person has no idea about these things. Or maybe they can't do these things well.

So I find it interesting that representation, when it's displayed in arts, or whether it's in a movie, or if it's in a play... I think that it's good that we can have honest portrayals of people who are on diversity and we don't need to make a big deal about it in that sense. We can have a person who is a mailman, and the mailman has to be deaf. Nobody makes a big deal of the fact that the mailman is deaf. That just happens to be who he is.

When friends describe me, they could say that they don't think about my deafness much. They think about it the same as a person having brown hair, same as person having blue eyes. They dress in this manner, that's just another aspect of their personality. And people tell me that deafness in that sense becomes invisible because they are used to it, they understand it, it's part of them, it's a characteristic, but it does not define.. .it's precisely who they are.

Brooke Leifso: Great.

Kelsie Acton: I have another part of my answer, if that's okay?

Brooke Leifso: Sure.

Kelsie Acton: Just about... You asked who's setting those cultural expectations. My first answer was mainstream, and I realized that that's not nearly a good answer. What I know in the work that I do is that there's a very strong colonialist approach to indigenous people, to aboriginal people, in that the minute that European settlers came on, they established that we were people that were vanishing. A race that was vanishing, and that we were going to be stuck in time, we were incapable of being in the future.

So this idea of, "Why should anybody expect me to be in a tee pee cooking bannock with my regalia on?" First of all, I would never cook bannock with my regalia on. And I'm terrible at making bannock as well. I make hockey pucks, what's more Canadian than that? But the point is that there is such a strong two hundred year practice of putting aboriginal people in a specific timeframe, and, again, identifying them as not being able to go beyond that. It's sad that now even in 2015 we are still operating and fighting against that idea.

Brooke Leifso: It's colonialism, effectively, right? We still live in a giant colony. I identify as a white settler, I wish I didn't have to, but that's my reality. Growing up in school, it's still a giant colonial mess that very few white settlers want to address because it's painful.

Kelsie Acton: Mm hmm.

Brooke Leifso:

Thank you for what you said. I really appreciate it.

I do want to get at the structural barriers, and maybe this is where I can do a tiny antio one on one, for the folks that aren't familiar with that largely academic theory. Using a structural versus personal, people personally suffer all the time. But I think what Kelsie was getting at, and I'll let her speak for herself, is that personally suffering is different than structural barriers that enable you not to access work.

I want to put it out, again, and not take up a lot of space with it. Does anyone in the audience want to talk about that? Because the rest of the questions may not work for you, or make sense if you don't understand that base.

Christine Frederick:

Can I throw in a couple of disability examples that may make the concept easier? The company I work with, we take an explicitly political approach that disability does not exist in the body. Disability exists outside the body in society. So the most basic example of this is, if you use a wheelchair, there are no barriers to access, if there are some ramps. Or if the snow is clear from the curb cuts, as often does not happen in Edmonton.

Or if you work with pain and fatigue. If your work offers you a flexible work schedule where you can take the time off that you need when your energy levels are low, you don't actually experience disability. But when all of those barriers are in place, you say you can't get into the building where you'd like to work. Or you can't have a work schedule that accommodates your needs. Even for many of our dancers, their doctor's schedules, which they're required to keep.

Then you are experiencing disability. Not because it exists in you, but because the rest of the world has a bunch of structures and rules about engaging that just don't match the way you live your life.

Brooke Leifso:

And I want to say, as someone who identifies as a crip, that it's also there's this assumption of who exists in spaces. Which is why I'm kind of like, "This is really valuable." Because of the fact that the late Roxy theatre never assumed that someone who uses a wheelchair would ever get on change.

That's an assumption of who's allowed in that space. As a crip performer, I've experienced that as well. Just another one about who is seen as audience, and who's assumed to be performers as well.

I have a

lot more questions, and we're running out of time. As always. More of an emotional one, which I think we can answer quickly, is, do you feel included? And do you want to feel included? And I'll follow it up with another.

Chris Dodd: I'll back up that one. Well, of course, I want to feel included. I mean who would not want to be included? It's in a sense, it's discrimination to not be included. As in terms of accessibility for myself in theater in Edmonton, some companies do on occasion offer one performance out of the run that has sign language interpretation it's not that common but it still happens on occasion, and I'm appreciative when that is available

I've been a subscriber for the Uni'Theatre theatre, at the Cite Francophone, the French Language theatre. And this company always puts on surtitles for their plays, because they're always offered in France. So I find those to be very accommodating in that regard because I can go in and I can sit there and I can watch the surtitles above the stage, and I can feel 100% included about the scenes and in what is going on.

I'm able to follow it in the same sense that anyone else in the audience is able to follow it. And it's amazing for me, because that's not an opportunity that happens so often. I saw their performance last night of 'Toubie et Not Toubie', and I was thinking to myself, "Why can't we do this with mainstream theatres? Why can't we take this and apply it to everything else? Not just French language theatre." It would be a bit unusual at first, it would take a little bit of getting used to, but after a little bit of time I'm sure it will become very normal and it will become very acceptable.

When I was growing up, the only way I could participate if I was watching movies, for example, if I went out to a mainstream movie theatre there were no captions available. But if I made it to the Princess theatre I could see the foreign language captioned movies there. And in a sense it's like this all over again, my childhood is replaying itself. Now I have access to the theatre, but it's only foreign language theatre. My hope of course would be able to access English language theatre in the same way, in the same manner.

Brooke Leifso: I just want to say, again, for people who are completely unfamiliar with this. That's an assumption that the audience all hears. Versus looking at how to diversify. So, what assumptions do we have? Basically.

Kelsie Acton: The blunt answer is, no. Generally because of my embodiment, I'm assumed to be a therapeutic helper in the space. Which is, yeah, I'm somehow graciously doing this out of the goodness of my heart. Not because I really like the people I work with and I want to make some good art. Which, I think is usually the baseline for some awesome art experiences.

There are things I deeply value about crip spaces. I think I'm not looking to do things like mainstream theatre and dance. What I'm looking for is dialog.

Christine Frederick:

That's a great point. Holy cow. You know, actually my answer extends more to, "Do I just feel included?" My blunt answer is, "No, I don't. I still don't." Part of it is because, even if I go for an audition for an aboriginal role, I'm AT, and people still have expectations of me looking like pre European indigenous, which is just hard.

I've literally been told, despite that I have Shakespearean experience, I articulate too much to play an Indian.

Brooke Leifso:

Can I just say, that's so racist. And I'm sorry.

Christine Frederick:

It is! It's so racist, it's terrible. And it's crazy. But I can audition to play a Lebanese person, I get the role like that. It's crazy. But the full answer that I want to talk about, is actually inclusion, or access is not enough. When I look at what barriers there are, and what can we do to actually nurture and cultivate the art scene? In this case I'm not even talking about the aboriginal art scene, but the art scene.

It's about access. And that's access to funding, access to venues, access to opportunities, access to other artists, access to development, access to so much! Which is different is inclusion. Very different. For example, I can pay the thousands of dollars to get in at the Citadel. That's access. That doesn't mean the Citadel, as a theatre company, is going to come and go, "Oh, we want to do Christine's play. We want to see her as an actress." That has never happened yet.

However, there are other organizations who are now inviting me to their aboriginal services meetings, they're looking at how can we collaborate on programming, how can we increase the opportunities for aboriginal people to use the spaces at the library. That's much more inclusive, where they're looking to changing their programming based on what my needs are, and what their needs are, and how mutual we can work together.

The other pillars of this development phase, development of the art scene, is recognition. I think that talks to what you're talking about. Recognition of the art forms. You know? And speaking about aboriginal people, there's a lot of art forms that are pitted as craft, hobbies. They're not seeing the outstanding dedication, the lifelong journey, and the cultural protocols that are in place in order to even have the right to learn some of those art forms.

So the idea of recognizing what the art forms are, recognizing the protocols, recognizing the education that goes into those art forms. And then the fourth pillar of my struggle here, is appreciation. Having not only the people in my community know who the supreme quality workers are, however you call the artists, but having everyone recognize that. That I can go and talk to an aboriginal youth and they won't go, "Who's Drew Haden Taylor? Who's Tomson Hill Way?"

Or that they wouldn't have to know that there are avenues that they can learn these things that are outside of university. Because that's the other thing, is that there are so many barriers that aboriginal people are facing that are structural, and systemic. But some of them are literally poverty. How can I even go to your theatre rehearsal when I can't pay for a bus fair, or parking? When I've got to pay for babysitting and all of these things?

There's a need to have those access inclusion, recognition, and appreciation to be celebrated in a way that is at the mayor celebration for the arts. That it's not just a one little dance, but actually reflects the awesome work that aboriginal people have contributed to this area for millennia, long before anybody else got in here.

Brooke Leifso: I have one more question and then I'm going to pass it on to Vern, actually, to finish off the panel. I feel like I should ask this question. I have found that a solution to creating diverse work is to self-produce. Because as we're talking, is that mainstream has some assumptions about who belongs there and what that work looks like.

And again, it's not mean spirited. It's just not maybe necessarily knowing. I'm happy to talk to anyone afterwards about that, if you like. But my question is, does this get us further ahead to self-produce? Or does it just ghettoize our work? Because some of the themes that I'm hearing here is that we want diverse roles to exist in mainstream theatre. However, we also want work valued at the same equal level as the Citadel's here, for example.

That's a question. By CRIPSiE just working with CRIPSiE, is that getting you further ahead? Or further behind?

Kelsie Acton: Wow. We called out CRIPSiE.

Brooke Leifso: No, I'm sorry. I just used you as an example because I work with you.

Kelsie Acton: Should I start? Something I struggle with. Because I feel like we're not just self-producing. Christine made a phenomenal point, because many of the people we work with live in poverty. They cannot access arts education. They cannot go see art, let alone engage with training in it. So we're not just self-producing, we're also trying to self-educate all at the same time.

Which is a bit of an overwhelming task someday. We're definitely bringing in people. I've had the great pleasure of working with Brooke over the past year, and have brought her in for an extended collaboration to teach her artists about the things that I'm not qualified to share my knowledge in. And other members of the company don't have knowledge in.

But I'm also very hesitant, because of the dialog about community work. And about development, if I can put quotes around that. I don't want somebody coming in to other therapize our dancers, and our artists, because they have been treated for most of their lives like they're broken. Every single activity they do must be therapy to make them better.

So that's a violent experience and I want to shield people from that. And I want to bring in people who will engage with them as artists. Not because they have unique stories, although they really do have unique, amazing life stories, but also because they have the possibility to create amazing art if they're given the tools and the guidance and the passion. And, yes, recognition to do that. Thank you.

Christine Frederick:

It's easy to get really passionate about this. And that's one of the things that I get told a lot, "Oh my God, Christine. You're so passionate." I'm like, "that's what I try and tell a lot of young, or emerging artists. 'Recognize what is at stake. And have the stamina... You have to think about your career, not just what's the next project. But try and have the stamina to go through.'" Sometimes it's negotiating, sometimes it's bulldozing. One of the answers to this is, multiple approaches.

There must be multiple approaches. There's no one right answer for any one artist. It's not either/or, "Do we self-produce or not self-produce?" It's, "Yes, let's do that and let's do this. Let's collaborate, let's try to find things." One of the things I've been trying to develop is actually an ally series. That'll plant the seed right there. An ally series, because I recognize that with doing indigenous theatre, or any indigenous art, I don't want it to be ghettoized, and the audience is not just indigenous people.

When we're working, we're looking at creating, or expressing our humanity to each other. And that is to all of each other, all of us. As our community. Hopefully that'll reflect our communal identity. There's a puzzle piece that's missing in Canada, and it is a recognition of the varied identities that are here, and celebrating them that is sincere and authentic.

There's an idea of having an indigenous artist [inaudible 30:12] that's kind of been floating around the last couple of years, and I've heard from the community that there's some people who are opposed to it, because they're afraid that it's going to be elitist. That it'll placate the idea of this Eurocentric run, the center of the white walls, and the track lighting.

Is that reflective of indigenous identity? I would say, "It's reflective of somebody's identity. And it might be an indigenous person. But it might also be, we might need another kind of display of that artwork. Or we might need another kind of theatre to be able to do this." And being able to work with people to recognize. I loved what you said because indigenous

people, too, are often received as recipients of service and not collaborators in that service.

I get told all the time, "Oh, have you gotten down to Boil Street?" I'm like, "Why would I go down to Boil Street? I'm dealing with professional theatre here." It's this constant idea that I should be working with social services. And it's like, "I'm not saying 'No' to that, again, because I believe in multiple approaches", but I want to see is people opening their minds to other opportunities. I want to work with the Citadel. That's where I want to go. Thank you.

Vern Thiessen: Chris, do you have anything to add to that, in terms of the ghettoization? Quote, unquote?

Chris Dodd: Ghettoization... In terms from my perspective, it would be ideal if people who were hard of hearing or deaf would be more integrated into the theatre scene. Like I said early, that is a bit of a challenge because I don't speak as clearly as other people. It's harder for me to represent myself, for instance, as a hearing person.

That means to be able to change things, either to be able to craft something yourself, or to take something that's existing and to modify it so that it fits into that type of role. Of course we want to...it's that debate between making your own material and being more involved in the mainstream... We don't want to lose our identity. Like I said before, we want recognition. We want to be understood for who we are and that we are unique as a person, but at the same time that it is a fact of life that people out there, people with disabilities, we make 1 in 10 people out there have a disability of some sort.

And that 1 in 4 people, according to the Hearing society are hard of hearing or Deaf. And so when we talk about representation, we should really have a representation of people within our art that reflects a diversity in our society, that shows people in a visible manner. Because that's not really something that's happening in popular media within the theatre community, whether local or national. There is not as much representation, as there could be.

As I said before with my example of the deaf milkman, in my opinion it's okay to have a person who does just exist. And who is just there, who represents themselves. They're just a person. They have a disability, yes. And they're a person who is marginalized in that sense, but it should not be something always that is something that needs to be talked about, or needs to be the main aspect of the story. That person represents someone who exists in society and they play that role just the same as I play my role in society. And they represent it how they're recognized.

That's what I would see.

Vern Thiessen: Thank you. It's Vern, and I'm back. For those listeners, who, sadly, had to go work the box office for our next show? I have two things that I'd like to do to wrap up this very important conversation. I wish we could talk longer about it, it's so important. One is that if there's any questions, I'm going to ask if there's any questions from our assembled group here, for you. And while we're doing that I would also like you guys to think about, if there's one thing, and I know there's a hundred, a thousand, maybe, things that you'd like to see changed.

But if there's one thing that you would want to see where the beginning of the change is, in whatever. For example, I work in a building, Workshop West Play Right's theatre, where intellectually committed to accessibility. But if you're in a wheelchair, you can't get in that building. And we've had discussions with the city about it and they're like, "Yeah, too bad." And so we're thinking about that and figuring out how we can address that.

For me, that's a very specific kind of thing that I'm personally embarrassed about, that I would like to see changed. If there's one little... It could be a very small thing, could be a big thing. But if there's one thing that you'd like to see changed, I would be interested to hear that. And if there's any questions. Think about that while I scan the audience for questions. Anybody? Yes, please. Yes, come and sit at the mic.

Jan: My name's Jan. I'm not an artist. I'm a theatre goer, theatre groupie, you might say. I got to a lot of theatre. Thank you all for coming, and I've appreciated... You couldn't see this if you were on tape, but when one of you would be making a point about accessibility, whether it was cultural accessibility or physical accessibility, or the hearing accessibility, the others would all nod because there was so much in common. Which, you have to pay attention to that. Because they're all different, but they're all the same. That's one thing.

And as a middle aged white person, and I go to a lot of theatre. It's being almost embarrassing to me that sometimes I look around and what I see is a lot of other middle aged white people at the theatre. And it's kind of a chicken and egg thing is that, "Well is that because there is nothing there that's going to interest anybody of another culture? Or is it because the artists, or theatre, or community hasn't enough allowed, or invited a greater diversity to come and attend these sorts of things?"

Vern Thiessen: Are you asking about the audience?

Jan: Well, as the audience, are the audiences not invited to come? The other diverse, as an audience member, this is, like I said.

Christine Frederick: Please come.

Vern Thiessen: Well, I don't want to put words in your mouth, Jan. But certainly

coming... I lived in New York City for a long time, and coming back to Edmonton... Christine, you and I had this discussion. It was like I was completely shocked at the audiences here because they were all white and that just never happens in New York. Never. Or, very rarely. Maybe on Broadway.

But even then, it's very rare to have a diverse audience. Do you have thoughts about that? Is that part of the welcoming, or unwelcoming feeling of getting into the theatre? Of going to a theatre piece and feeling like, "Wow, I'm the only person here who is this person."

Christine Frederick:

I have been at, many times, and in starting my own company, Alberta Aboriginal Arts, one of the things that I started to do when we are in different venues, and I make a point of asking... Actually even when it's not my show. There have been times... I was at the Winspear for the Festival of Ideas last winter with Margaret Atwood and Alanis Morissette, and I had the opportunity to meet them, but I was too shy.

I was trying to figure out, "What's my approach? How do I make this unique?" Other than, "I'm just such a big fan!" And I finally figured out what I was going to say, and then they left the room. At the first moment of the Q&A I prepped over to the microphone, I was the first person there, and I begged their pardon and I asked if I could please have a show out of the sold out performance conversation of 17 hundred people in the audience, how many were aboriginal? Including myself and my sister, there were three other people. Out of 17 hundred people in Edmonton, at the Winspear that day.

And then I approached them and I said, "On behalf of, not only these five, but also the aboriginal people here, I bid you welcome to the traditional lands of the Metis, the Cree, and the Black Foot. To recognize that we gather, not just today, but every day." And part of that is, it is both. What is that one thing I would want to change? It's... Everybody recognizing that we really are incredibly diverse! That if we just look around. I've had so many people come to me, "Where are all the aboriginal people?" Well, "Who are you looking for? Are you looking for me? Or are you looking for Pocahontas? Are you looking for a crazy, half naked brave? Are you looking for the diversity...? There's 600 nations in the aboriginal culture. So what you're looking for becomes that question."

So I would ask, "Recognize the power that each of us have to change." I really appreciated what Chris was talking about, about how hard it is for you to communicate. And actually what I think it is, is that a lot of us... A lot of anybody, we mitigate our own laziness. Our own apathy to surmount the hardship of communicating with you. That is part of it, and it's the same thing when I meet somebody who's interested in aboriginal culture. They're so scared for some reason. "Oh, I have a really dumb question." They always start off that way. I'm like, "It's

not a dumb question! It's a brilliant question! Ask your question and get the answer so that we can get over this part!"

And find that bridge. So that would be the one thing that I would want, is that... I shouldn't say "Start", I've been having these dialogs for a long time, but let's always engage in these dialogs. Let's open our minds and our hearts to the diversity that's really here. And recognize that, if there is some disparity, we all have the power to close it.

I could go on and on, but I want my friends here to answer too.

Vern Thiessen: Listen, thank you very much. In our last minute or two, I would love to know the one thing that you would like to change.

Kelsie Acton: The question actually touched on it. I'm very excited now, about audience accessibility practices. I think they're really easy ways to make theatre spaces and theatre going and performance going much friendlier. I find a lot of people in my community, if they don't know a building, they will assume it's inaccessible, which is not an unreasonable assumption and eminent.

But also things like making ASL interpretation available. Making visual description available, making sure that you have a couple of things you can show. Because, people's work schedules are not always going to line up with the single pay what you can show that you have in your entire run.

Make bus tickets available, make food available. And make sure that people know that this is available. Detail accessibility information on your website, when you advertise the show. Because people will assume that it's not there. And it's not accessible if you don't tell them that it is.

Vern Thiessen: Thank you. Chris?

Chris Dodd: My perspective... Well, I want to give my perspective as a person who is deaf. Because that's specifically my perspective in this case. But one thing which I would change from my perspective is to give greater access to audiences who are deaf and hard of hearing. And like I mentioned, right now the biggest barriers, are that they're going to go in to see a play and they're not going to be able to understand. Maybe they can bring a hearing friend with them, and the friend can try to interpret for them during the course of the play. They'll get 30 percent of what's happening on stage, but that's not really enough. That's not really acceptable in that regard.

If we want to have more representation for theatre, then we want to have people within the deaf community to see the theatre. And in this case it acts as a catalyst, them experiencing theatre would... I would hope, motivate them to want to create theatre for themselves. They won't be able to be involved in the process and to be able to accelerate things from

that point. I think that the real reason that we don't see Deaf theatre here in Edmonton is that deaf people are not included. We're not part of it, we're not in the audience, like they say. We're not part of the big masses of white middle-aged people. We're not present there.

So if we have ASL interpretation, if we have surtitles, if we have ways to make this accessible so they can participate, that would make a significant difference.

Vern Thiessen: Well, I wish we had more time. I want to thank you all for coming. I know that as an artistic director I've gained a lot from this conversation, you've given me tons of ideas of how we can make Workshop West more accessible in the future. And I'm certainly hoping that we'll be able to, in the very near future, like tomorrow, start working at making our shows more accessible.

Thank you very much, and thank you to Taylor and Brian for the 'What it is' podcast for allowing this to happen. This will come up on their site at some point in time in the next little while. Thank you again for coming, and thank you for participating. I really appreciate it.

Kelsie Acton: Thank you.

Vern Thiessen: There's a show starting at 7:00 over there, so I have to run because I have to do a bunch of things. Thank you so much. Thanks a lot, Christine.

Christine Fredericks: Thanks.