



**After Immunity: Understanding the Post-COVID-19 World<sup>1</sup>**

**Episode Two: Canada's Local Arts Scene After Immunity**

**Interview with Debbie Werner**

**Published on April 21, 2021**

**Ian T. D. Thomson [IT]:** To kick off this discussion is Debbie Werner, the Executive Director of the Toronto Jewish Film Festival. The festival was one of the first in Canada to transition from an in-person to online festival when faced with the challenges of the pandemic in June of 2020. Debbie, thank you so much for joining us.

**Debbie Werner [DW]:** Thank you. Thank you for having me here.

**IT:** So obviously today we're talking about the local art scene and how it will transform, but I think a good place to start is to talk about the Toronto Jewish Film Festival. Can you

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<sup>1</sup> After Immunity is a UMF 101.5 limited series broadcasted out of the University of Manitoba. For more info on the series visit: <https://umfm.com/series/after-immunity>  
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describe to our listeners what the mandate of the Toronto Jewish Film Festival is and how the festival first came into existence?

**DW:** OK, so it's actually [the] Toronto Jewish Film Foundation that is really the parent organization that presents the Toronto Jewish Film Festival. We came about in 1993, [that] was the first festival, and it featured 14 films that were presented over five days at one venue. And we have over the years grown to being the largest presenter of Jewish content film in Canada and the largest, one of the largest, cultural events in the Jewish communities across Canada. And we are now going into our 29th year. And while it will not yet be a normal year... *For* a normal year we would normally be looking at a festival that would be screening at around seven or eight venues across the GTA, we would be looking at around a hundred films from Canada and around the world, welcoming over 25 000 people through the door.

**IT:** Mm hmm. Again, it's very interesting. It sounds like a very interesting history of how it's developed, and I think an important aspect of that history is what happened last year with the 2020 festival. And obviously the pandemic has placed a lot of restrictions on theaters, and it certainly changed how your organization had to function last year (the festival moved online, and it was in two parts, May/June and October/November). In your own words, how did the pandemic change the festival in 2020? What were the kind of the changes you had to make to make it function in the middle of a pandemic?

**DW:** Well, so at the point that we went into lockdown about mid-March last year, plans were like beyond well underway for our 2020 festival. We had our lineup in place, negotiations were starting with the film distributors to lock in the titles, to firm up the plans. And we were really happy with the way the festival was coming along and then all of a

sudden, everything ground to an immediate halt. We were really fortunate: our director of programming, Jérémie Abessira, did not waste a moment trying to figure out how we were going to salvage all of the work that had been done to that point. And we really hated to see the lineup go to waste, and we worked towards - through hard research, fast research - being able to pivot to an online festival. We felt very beholden to our community, to the donors, to the sponsors, to deliver the annual festival as expected. And I think probably at the point that we all went into lockdown, I don't think any of us perhaps understood how long we were locking down for. So it seemed like a challenge that we were up to taking on. The truth was that we really didn't have any idea how to go about any of this. We didn't know if film distributors were going to be able to work with us. Would we be able to develop the viewing platform that would work successfully for viewers at home? Would we be able to integrate a viewing platform with our box office? Would audiences be receptive to an online festival? And really importantly, would we be able to afford to do this? And they were all unknowns and that was all part of the decision that we made to take our lineup and split it over two deliveries. So, I'm appreciating that we were forging into new territory and feeling our way as we went. That we were on a very big learning curve. So the idea was to do it, but to do it as responsibly as we could. So to start off with the spring edition, make sure that it worked for everyone, make sure it was something that actually [the] festival could afford to do, and then tweak and improve and move on to the fall. And that's pretty much what we did.

**IT:** Mm hmm. It's really interesting just because, as you said, Ontario and a lot of parts of Canada really locked down in March. And here you are as a festival in May/June, you kind of were one of the first? Were you the first?

**DW:** We were. We did not know that, we had no idea at the time that we were the first. We found out afterwards because as soon as we announced, and we were able to announce – so we locked down I think it was like March 14th, 15th, something around there and we announced the online festival by the beginning of April, the first week of April – the phone started ringing. From other festivals in the city, across the country, outside of the country. [Asking] what were we doing? How were we doing it? And we, at that point, we really had no idea that we were the first community festival to go online.

**IT:** Oh, wow. I don't know if that's an achievement or in some ways the biggest risk, because you took on the biggest risk as the first online festival.

**DW:** There were a couple outside of Canada that had started. In the States I think that there were one or two that were already underway as well.

**IT:** Yeah. But still one of the first.

**DW:** Yeah, we were one of the first. And I think...it was probably a good thing that we didn't understand that we were kind of quite a new territory that we were biting off. Now look, a year later, everybody that can be there is there now, right? Like we really see that we have a very full online arts and culture presence that's happening.

**IT:** I'm really glad you mentioned that just because I want to talk about the viewers themselves. Because you have the festival, but on the other side, you always have the viewers and those that engage with the festival, those that are interested in it. In your view, looking back, how did the pandemic change how viewers engaged with the festival? Were there any new audiences that came to the festival?

**DW:** Yeah, for sure. So with our spring festival, we were all facing like huge flux and huge change. Everybody, we were all in shelter-in-place orders, and our goal was really to try to replicate the feel of the festival. Distributors hadn't been approached yet by community festivals, so at the time we were negotiating it was really just like working for transitioning what we would normally do, presenting a festival in the GTA, we were really just presenting, again, trying to present in the GTA online. For our fall festival, we realized that there was actually the opportunity to try to offer our programming to more than just the GTA, and we were able to work with the distributors. And not just the distributors, but also the other smaller Jewish film festivals in Ontario who we wanted to be very respectful of and cognizant of, to service their communities as well and to service communities that never had festival programming before. So that was a bonus, right, to be able to do that. And I'm already losing track of where the question was, I could ramble on a whole bunch of things, but maybe you want to steer me back in.

**IT:** Yeah, well it sounds like you were able to expand the viewership, [the amount of] folks that can engage with the festival.

**DW:** It was a big difference between the spring festival and the fall festival for the industry and for the public. So, for the industry, they had to figure out what it meant to be providing viewing windows for online festivals as opposed to screening rights for an in theater, and that kind of came under way over the process between the spring and the fall. For the viewers, they were also on the learning curve. We all had to learn how to get a little more acquainted with our technology at home. And we worked really hard to try to take our viewers through it as we were learning how to do it. So our festival, you were able to watch our festival and all of our programming that we continue to do online using your computer

or mobile device, but you can also watch on your television. We've had apps built with Roku and with Apple TV. You can Chromecast, you can connect an HDMI cable. Some people, when you say these things, go "Oh, yeah, I know what you mean" and some people ask you, "what are you talking about?". So we worked hard to try to develop a means of taking an audience that was used to showing up at the theater, sitting down in the seat, now how to configure their at-home viewing preferences so that we could try again to replicate as close as possible the experience of festival. We made how-to videos, we put instructions on, we held info sessions, we sent out a test film. We made a test film available prior to the festival so that people could get themselves set up and ready prior to the festival, so that when it began they would be able to comfortably watch. And we ran tech support. We ran it, we hired a group of very patient people to work with our viewers leading up to the festival and throughout the festival.

**IT:** Mm hmm. In preparing for this interview, I went to the website and you're absolutely right. There are clear instructions on how to do it on every platform imaginable.

**DW:** But clear is a really relative term, right?

**IT:** Fair enough, fair enough. You know, it's a question of "will my parents be able to figure it out?", and that's something I had to figure out yesterday for sure. I want to just take this conversation maybe just a little bit higher, and [examine] the idea of accessibility. You have this new online service delivery model, very practically putting it in place for the festival in 2020. But just thinking more generally, very future oriented, how do you think that this new online service delivery model will affect accessibility of your content in the post-COVID-19 world?

**DW:** So we built, or had developed, in order to host our festivals what we call the TJFF Virtual Cinema. And we developed this out of necessity, but I believe we will continue to use this virtual cinema long after this is behind us, the pandemic is behind us. Because for some people it proved to be a more accessible and convenient means of participating in our programming. What we learned through the virtual programming is that it breaks down a lot of barriers that people had, be they geography, mobility, time, economics even. It allowed us to deliver programming to areas that never had programming before. It provided people with the convenience of being able to watch – within a viewing window for a film – but when they wanted, there were no lineups, there was no traffic to deal with, there were no outrageous parking fees. So for some people, they really preferred this. You didn't have to dress up, you didn't even have to get dressed to attend the festival. And so I think that there were some real benefits for some.

Listen, having said that, I really miss the shared experience of watching a film with an audience. I definitely miss the theater popcorn, and the sense of being together and part of something together when we're at the festival. But I think that the online programming definitely has its benefits as well.

**IT:** I'm really glad that you mentioned the theater experience. Right now [there are] discussions in both the local arts scenes as well as just in general, as this pandemic goes on, there are a lot of questions and there's a lot of discussion about what things are going to stick after this pandemic. Will people be heading back to the theater at the same rate as before? Or will things be like premium video-on-demand, where you have these large scale blockbusters on various streaming sites, and that's the launch. In your view, do you think we will go back to that status quo or will there be longer lasting changes in how we consume local arts and culture in the post-COVID-19 world?

**DW:** I'm hoping that we will see a return to something that is a recognizable version of normal for us, and I'm hoping that we will go back to theaters [and that they] will survive. Listen, I work in the nonprofit arts sector. Most of the arts take place in that sector. It is precarious at the best of times in that we really - in order to sustain ourselves, to thrive, to do what we do – rely on the support of our communities, of public funders. We rely on people valuing the arts as part of their lives. So, yes, I hope that we are able to return to the theaters and able to support the theaters again and to meet again.

You know, for all the wonderful things that I've said about the online programming, for some, this has still remained an isolating experience, right? It probably makes a difference whether you're home watching alone or you're with your family. You know, who's on the couch with you when you're watching right? Like I said before, we've tried really hard to replicate in our online programming the feel of the festival. Festivals have an energy to them, they have a flow and excitement about them. We tried very hard in the way that we laid out the festivals to replicate that. We didn't go with the Netflix model of just dumping all the films on the platform at once, and you watch them when you want. We released films each day that we generated a little buzz and excitement for what was in store for you each day. We were able to keep interaction with our audiences in place by hosting live Q&As

But at the same time, there were things that were definitely missed. Audiences connected through us over Zoom, not with each other in the same respect. And one area that we have not been able to figure out how to manage online is the whole area of the 150 to 180 volunteers that were part of the festival every year that lend so much flavor and warmth to our festival. For them this was a social activity, an annual experience that so many of them participated in. Faces we look forward to seeing, part of the team, year after year. Those



things don't get replaced by this online world and those things, I think, have a lot of value for our community.

**IT:** I'm really glad that you brought up that concept of community, because I think something that we haven't talked about is the idea that throughout this pandemic, a number of long established arts and culture institutions, because of pandemic restrictions, had to ultimately close their doors. Kind of tied to this idea of community, do you have any thoughts on how the scene will recover after immunization in this post-COVID-19 world?

**DW:** Well, I'm hoping that when we all return back to...a lot of the things that we have lost that we want back (maybe some things we don't want back but the things that we want back after this world) that people won't forget how the arts helped them get through this period of unprecedented challenge. That we saw a lot of creativity despite the circumstances that we found ourselves in, isolated at home. We saw a lot of innovation and a lot of resilience from the nonprofit arts sector. And a sector, as I said before, that really faces precarious employment at the best of times. And I'm really hoping that people remember how the films and the books and the music and the dance that they experienced at home during this time, how it helped to lift our spirits, how it sustained us, and comforted us, [and helped to] just pass the time. It educated us and entertained us. And I think it kept people feeling vital when there was often (I know for me) there's often been a feeling of helplessness through this. That, as individuals, what can we do outside of staying home, wearing masks, distancing, all of those things? So I'm really hoping that people, when it is a safe world and people are comfortable and ready to come out of their homes, that they really will continue to support and protect the arts organizations that they hold dear.

**IT:** Yeah, like seeing the value that local arts and culture has given back to the community during this time. Debbie, this is of course a forward looking limited series and of course one aspect of being forward looking is looking forward to what the 2021 Toronto Jewish Film Festival has to offer. What can viewers look forward to with 2021 festival?

**DW:** So our 29<sup>th</sup> edition will be taking place June 3<sup>rd</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> of this year. The plans are well underway right now. Our programming committee are working hard on coming up with the lineup. We are continuing to plan with the safety and comfort of audiences in mind, so while we hope that the world will be moving towards, in the coming months, towards some safe opportunities to leave our homes, we are also planning that we will be programming online again. And that programming will include all of the wonderful things that people have come to expect over the years from TJFF. It's going to be fantastic films from Canada and around the world, great Q&As with filmmakers, panel discussions, special events. We continue to innovate as we go, look for new opportunities and collaborations to work with other community and arts organizations, and to share the expertise and the wealth of riches that the arts sector has to offer. So we hope to make that all part of the 29<sup>th</sup> Toronto Jewish Film Festival.

**IT:** That sounds terrific. That sounds very exciting, and we certainly wish you all the support and look forward to seeing it, if we can see it, in theaters. But it sounds like you've got a pretty good online service delivery model, now tested I guess you could say.

**DW:** We do. And I have to say, it's not just a festival that we offer. We have online programming that is going on all the time.

We have a pretty full roster for the coming months, so if I can give a little shout out right now for it. Some of our programming, our festival programming is unfortunately only available in Ontario, but we also have an online streaming platform that is accessible and free for all viewers across Canada. It's called *J-Flix* and it's available at [J-Flix.com](http://J-Flix.com). We add new titles weekly and it is where we showcase favourite films from our past festivals. So I encourage anyone that is looking for some wonderful films and looking for a little change from their usual streaming platforms to check it out, go to [J-Flix.com](http://J-Flix.com).

**IT:** That sounds great. Debbie, we really appreciate the time and being able to hear your thoughts, your experiences from the pandemic, as well as just your perspective on where you think all of this is headed. Do you have any concluding thoughts on the future of the art scene in Canada in general after immunization?

**DW:** I am hoping that when we are all vaccinated, when it is safe to come out of our home, that we will be able to celebrate *that* accomplishment through the arts. I think that there is going to be a real hunger for people to get up and move, to be back in the places that made them happy before the pandemic. And you know, one thing about this lockdown is [that] we've probably all come to really be able to identify the theaters, the music halls, the bookstores, the coffee shops, the places outside of our homes that maybe we just took for granted before but now we really know that we want back in our lives. And I'm hoping that the arts scene across Canada remains strong and robust, and has the opportunity and the support behind it to flourish and to make a recovery.

**IT:** That's a great way to end off. Debbie, thank you so much for your time. We really appreciate it.

**DW:** Thank you, it's a pleasure speaking with you.