



After Immunity: Understanding the Post-COVID-19 World¹

Episode Two: Canada's Local Arts Scene After Immunity

Interview with Faye Thomson

Published on April 21, 2021

Ian T. D. Thomson [IT]: Faye Thomson is the co-director and co-founder of the Professional Program of The School of Contemporary Dancers in Winnipeg. Faye, thank you so much for joining us.

Faye Thomson [FT]: Absolutely.

IT: So I guess just to kick us off a little bit, for those that might be unfamiliar with the school, can you describe to the listeners the objective of the school and what sort of programs and services it offers?

¹ 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>
If you have any thoughts or comments on the series, email us at after.immunity@umfm.com

FT: Sure. Our school is known as one of the leading centers for professional contemporary dance training in Canada. So there are a few schools across Canada that are funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage, federally, as a National Center of Excellence for Training, in this case in contemporary dance. They also fund for other art forms as well. And we're also funded by the Manitoba Arts Council, and the Winnipeg Arts Council. And our mandate is to produce professional dancers for our local, national and international contemporary dance community. And our graduates are across the country and across the world. And we also have an evening program, a junior professional program for high school students that are preparing for our post-secondary program, our professional program. And we also have a general program for community outreach for the student that might want to study once a week. So the center of the school is the professional program. It's affiliated with the University of Winnipeg and students can attain a degree as well as a conservatory training.

IT: So it sounds like there's quite a number of different services and programs that the school is able to offer, and it sounds like they produce the dancers that we might see at the national and international level. That's terrific. So the series as a whole is talking about that post-pandemic future and what lies ahead, but you can't start from that position. You've got to start with what's going on currently and the pandemic that we're facing right now as we talk over this Zoom call. How has the pandemic and its restrictions affected those programs that you just described for us, and your ability to administer the school?

FT: I think for all the performing arts organizations it's been an absolutely crazy year. Because instead of creating one season, everybody is creating a new season, and a new season, and another season, as we pivot with all the different rises and falls of the wave[s] of the pandemic. So it's interesting. You have to be very agile and you have to be ready to

pivot in any direction at any moment. So for us, the way we prepared to be able to do that is we have a hybrid model that we're working with so that we can be totally in the studio if restrictions were totally released, we could be totally online if there's a surge of the pandemic, and we can also blend the online and the in-studio if needed. So it's been not unique to us either: every artistic director that I've spoken to... We're responding with agility at every moment, I would say. And not just us, but I just hear it right across the country.

IT: That's interesting that, as you said, you have that hybrid model prepared at any instance for how things might change over the course of weeks, months, days even. Insofar as that kind of model goes, these steps that you've taken, is this something you think you'd be able to maintain in the long term, or is this kind of a short term "band-aid" solution"?

FT: Well, I would say it could be both. In the short term, the hybrid model allows us to address any restrictions. And also, it's very important to us to keep these students safe. So at all points we have to be ready to respond. And then [for] some elements in the program... it's interesting. We found that having an online element in some cases was interesting and might be something that we might keep. But on the other hand, some elements definitely need an in-studio component, a strong in-studio component. So there are elements that have been revealed as interesting and intriguing in the current situation, and I think that's true of a lot of the performing arts organizations. And then there's other elements that need to return to the in-studio, the in-theater aspect as being fundamental to the nature of the art form.

IT: It's really interesting, just in the sense of that online format, finding what works and in what aspects it works. I want to talk about that, in terms of the trends you've seen and the

way that things have moved around. So the school itself has engaged in both online shows as well as outdoor shows, earlier in the pandemic when restrictions weren't as "tight", you could say. How do you feel about those approaches, about the online format as well the outdoor format? How do you think those shows went?

FT: Well, even in terms of the training, the online has been very important in the sense that there are certain subjects that can be presented well online. So we have a dance legacy course, that could be presented well online. We have a music course; we were able to present that online very well. We had even partnering lectures with a very renowned national artist, Sylvain Lafortune, who did a partnering lecture series that worked beautifully online. We've also drawn on the online in that we have out of province guests always every year, many out of province guests that come in. Many of them cannot come in now, but they can come online and they can do their creative process through the online, and it would not otherwise be possible to engage them. If students have even the mildest symptoms of illness, if they have a runny nose, if they have a cough, they can't come in until they're cleared medically. So they can be online and do a class and take part if they feel well enough to do that. And we've also had international students – because we have students from across the world as well as across Canada that come into the program – we've had students that have been online doing classes and rehearsals, waiting for safe travel into Canada.

So the online component has actually been very important in terms of operating within this year. In terms of performance itself, what we did for our December performance series we had to move online for three weeks in November when cases surged. Because we're a post-secondary program we weren't required legally to do so, but we felt the cases were such that it was the prudent thing to do. So we went online and came into the theater in

January instead of December. And by January we were able to bring the dancers into the theater in very small groups, social distancing, masks on – they've learned to dance with masks on – and film each of their pieces in a very safe environment. And then that's being compiled and it will be presented as an online performance. And we're not unique in that, a lot of the arts organizations, dance organizations, are presenting their performances online. And that's interesting in the sense that there has certainly been an interest in filming and presenting online, but this has accelerated the focus on that way of delivery. At the same time, there is a hunger on the part of the performers, and the audience, to come together in the live interchange and synergy that happens when we have live performance. And that, I don't think will ever change. It will continue to be important to have that coming together in live presentation, in the performing arts. So I think it's catapulted the development of presenting online. I think it will continue; I think it's brought out some interesting things artistically that people have investigated. At the same time, in-person, audience there, performers there, the magical interchange, nothing can replace that.

IT: That provides a really helpful perspective, I think, in terms of what's worked and what hasn't worked. So it really sounds like, correct me if I'm wrong, that the online format and certain aspects of teaching online might be still seen as something to incorporate into how you teach dance moving forward, even past the pandemic. Would that be fair to say?

FT: I would say there are certain subjects that might be considered, maybe more academic subjects that can be presented well online. And there are also the students. We brought in courses that gave the students new skills in how to film their own creative processes and how to compile a presentation online. So there's new skills that they've actually learned that we brought into the program this year that everybody's very excited about and that we will carry forward into next year. But in terms of training, there's nothing

that will replace having that interaction of the teacher, the rehearsal director, in the studio, the interchange with the dancer, because it's such a physical, tactile art form that it's vital to have that interchange in the long term in terms of the development of the future dancer or performing artist. It's interesting, some things have been discovered, and I don't think that's unique to us. And then, of course, some of it is ways of delivering and continuing to move forward until we can return to where we ultimately will need to be.

IT: Again, it's really interesting to me that there seems to be some innovations happening in terms of how dance is communicated actually, or expressed, and that switch to an online or a screen-based format seems to be one of them. So earlier in this topic, we talked to a film festival about how they've had to move online and for better or for worse, they've been able to make that transition because they've dealt with screens before. Insofar as what you've just talked about, about teaching the students how to communicate or film the dance, I was wondering if you could maybe talk a little bit about that, about how dance might be evolving into a sort of screen-based medium. How has that played out, and do you think that it's something we're going to see more of into the future?

FT: The way it occurred within our program is we brought in an international guest artist, [and] she paired up with a videographer. So the two of them together were working with the dancers. So while they were looking at aspects of creating their own compositions, they were also learning skills in terms of how to record what they were doing, and even how to explore the creation from certain viewpoints given what they were discovering within the work with the videographer.

So that certainly has been a discovery. And we've just finished another process, where again, a dance artist that works within film a lot has been brought in to work with another

artist. We have Susie Burpee from Toronto working with our students right now on a composition process and she's partnering with one of her long time dance partners, Linnea Swan in Calgary. And Linnea has had extensive work in film and dance, and the two of them are partnering together. So it's a new exploration, I think, for all of us. It's certainly been there, it's not that there hasn't been film and there hasn't been online, but it's suddenly catapulted to a new level of importance. And I think that that will continue, but there will definitely be the return to the live performance experience. There's no replacing that kind of experience like that. And you can feel it, in the dancers and in the audience, that people want to come together again and they want to have that interchange. So I think both things will happen going forward.

IT: I was wondering if you might be able to speak a little bit more to those aspects that aren't able to be replaced online. Because as I said, we talked to a film festival about this and, you know, it's a movie, that is its original medium in how it communicates artistic expression. Whereas dance is, as you said, it's in a theater and that's how people have traditionally gone to see contemporary dancers. So I was wondering if you might be able to explain a little bit more about what might make dance different from the other mediums in the local art scene, and what can and can't be communicated online.

FT: Well, first of all, in training itself, if you're in a performing arts form – and certainly in dance – within the studio, there's a kind of level of coaching that happens that is very difficult to do on a Zoom format or another online format. And that would be where you're wanting, first of all, to demonstrate in a full space the kind of movement calls you want. You want to move in and have some tactile interaction in terms of refinement of technique, and the immediacy of the interchange allows for elegant detailing in the technique and artistry of the dancer. So that kind of interchange, at that depth, is not possible in the long

term in an online format. The bigger picture you could deal with in the online format, but delving in and getting into the depth of the experience and the depth of the training can only happen really once you're in the studio. And then in terms of live performance, I think it's not unique to dance. We actually even see it in sports, like we have sports events happening where they're in a stadium or they're in an arena and they miss the fact that they don't have spectators there. And it's the same really in the performing arts. The artist is interacting with the audience and the audience is really interacting with the performer, in a live performance event. So that aspect adds a whole other layer to what's taking place, and that's something that needs to have that coming together to happen.

IT: Yeah, and those are the sort of elements that we might see return in that post-COVID world. Would that be fair to say?

FT: Oh, yes. Yes, I think there's no doubt. I think there might even be an explosion of live performances after we're all vaccinated so, yes. I don't think that means that the intriguing interest that's come in terms of exploring the online aspect of working within the arts will dissipate, but I think there will be almost an explosive return to a live performance.

IT: Both for the artists and the audiences alike, you could even say. So one aspect that I found interesting in exploring this topic has kind of been an analogy of the arts, and seeing the arts as like castles in the sand sometimes. Where pieces are presented, they're performed, and sometimes they're forgotten. And one of the trends we've seen with some arts groups or some film festivals, some mediums, has been utilizing past archived performances to engage with audiences. Has this been a technique incorporated by the school or do you have any thoughts on that incorporation of past events and materials in the post-COVID-19 world?

FT: In terms of the school, the works that we mount...there [are] a variety of ways that works are mounted. One is that they're created in the moment, for the group that's there. Another way that's done is they're remounted from archives of works that have been done. So with the choreographer's permission and the choreographer facilitating, it could be a remount and therefore it could be something that comes from the archives and has that kind of legacy. Or there could be a blend of the two of those things where somebody is inspired by something they've done before, but they want to create it in a new life. So all those things are possible. And I think there's beauty in both. Because with visual art, we don't look at a painting once and then throw it out because we've seen it and that's the end of it. So there is a beauty in revisiting and exploring in our observation more depth in terms of what we're experiencing. At the same time, there's a beauty in something that is temporary, just in that moment. And even though a performance might be videoed and recorded, whatever happens in that live performance is really unique to that moment, and that makes it very special and precious.

IT: I really like how you articulated that, and I think that's a great way to sum up a little bit of the different elements of art, and why we appreciate art. I kind of want to switch directions a little bit and talk about supports of the local arts and a little bit of the recovery of dance, you could say. So you mentioned at the onset information regarding the school itself and the supports it receives from government and arts based associations. And they are important to that long term prosperity of the local arts scene. What role would you like to see these associations, and government, play in the local art scenes in Canada after the pandemic is over? Where do they fit in that world, do you think?

FT: In terms of the national arts training programs, we were very fortunate that along with the professional companies, we were all given an emergency 25% increase in our operating funding, the one year increase, to deal with the emergencies around the pandemic. And that was true of our programs that are funded by Canadian Heritage and the companies that are funded by the Canada Council for the Arts. So that was a tremendous thing that was initiated and they made it very simple. It was the first time ever that I personally have had a simple grant application, ever. So they made it very easy and the money came very quickly, and that was tremendous. What we are currently asking is that they consider extending that emergency funding. Not just our program, but what's being asked across the country in terms of the Canada Arts Training Fund that we're funded by, [is] that this emergency funding be extended into the next season because we'll be in [a] recovery phase. So it won't be immediately [that] we can go from zero to 100 in terms of economic resources. So the hope is that would be extended into another year, and then ultimately there is a request to consider further funding to address all the areas. There's a variety of areas to be addressed in the Canada Arts Training Fund, under Canadian Heritage. We also have that access [to] the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy and that has been a tremendous asset to us and, we are hearing, to other arts organizations as well. So that's been very significant. And the other thing is we have accessed money, along with other organizations, from the Winnipeg Foundation, in order to purchase many things that we require to operate safely. Like sanitizers, and HEPA filter air purifiers, and a whole long list of numerous things that had to be implemented so we would have layer, upon layer, upon layer of safety measures. So that came from the Winnipeg Foundation. So we have been very appreciative of that support.

IT: So it sounds like the way they can help is to assist in the recovery while you deal with the challenges you faced from the pandemic. In light of those challenges – this is a rather

general question but I think we've been talking about it throughout this interview – how do you see the dance scene, and the profession itself, recovering and evolving in Canada because of this pandemic? Is it now kind of going on a different trajectory, you could say?

FT: I would say yes, and no. I would say there are new elements coming into play, and that's going to be a gift that came out of this crazy time. At the same time, I think there will be a resurgence of returning to many of the things that we've all valued all the way along and a celebration of that return. So I think both things will happen.

IT: Faye, we're nearing the end of the questions here, but I was wondering, do you have any final thoughts in regards to the local arts scene and how it might evolve in the post-COVID-19 world?

FT: What I would say is: I have great hope for the future because it's been amazing how creative everyone has been. There's been a tremendous amount of creativity in responding, very quickly, to changing circumstances, and I see that right across Canada, and I think it's a testament to the creativity of the arts organizations. So I'm not sure exactly in detail where we are all going, but I have great hope for the future.

IT: Faye, I think that's a hopeful way to end things off here. Faye, thank you so much for your time, being able to talk to us about the local art scene as it pertains to the medium of dance. It was a very insightful conversation.

FT: Absolutely. Thank you.