



# Equity on Stage

## REPORT: Audience & Patron Perspectives

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[www.transposethestage.ca](http://www.transposethestage.ca)



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This study was launched at *Found Fest 2021*, with a survey called "Patron Perspectives on Equity" and a series of in-person conversations that artists self-selected to attend as part of 'Letter to Audiences'.

# Contents

- 03 Purpose & Approach
- 04 Participants
- 05 Findings
- 08 Recommendations
- 09 References & Resources
- 10 Acknowledgements

Visit [transposethestage.ca](https://transposethestage.ca) for more resources that are provided free-of-cost to help artists and institutions break free of limiting theatre practices.

# Purpose & Approach

In Edmonton, and across Canada and the world, the theatre industry has been engaged in a push towards more meaningful inclusion of diverse stories and theatre workers. This movement has been largely stewarded by theatre workers from equity-seeking groups who have felt shut out of the industry for too long.<sup>1</sup>

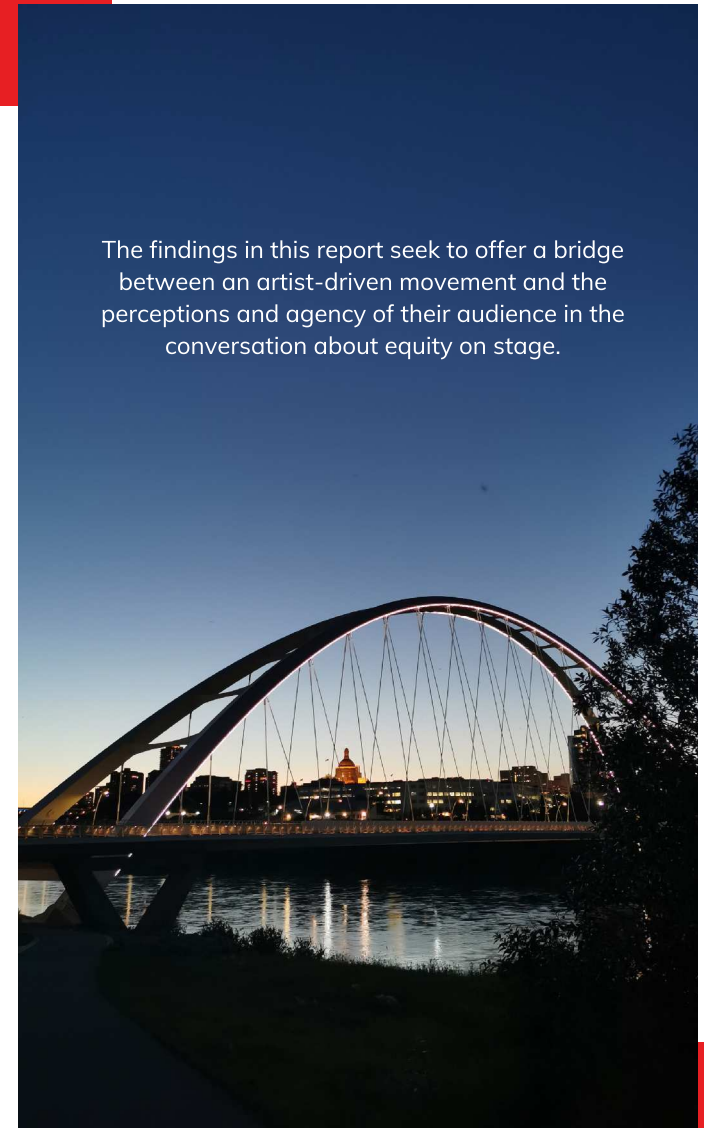
This study was part of a project called '[Letter to Audiences](#)' that invited patrons into the conversation. Perhaps the most important relationship in the theatre industry is between an artist and their audience.

**“ Indigenous peoples and people of colour are nearly two times more likely to say they do not participate in culture activities because the activities do not reflect people of all backgrounds.**

**-Calgary Arts Development, 2017**

This study sought to bridge communication between artists and theatre-goers, and explore the agency of theatre patrons to influence equity on stage. Through partnership with independent theatre companies in Edmonton, data for this study was collected over six months by advertising a public survey, hosting small gatherings, and reaching out to various companies' networks of subscribers.

The findings in this report seek to offer a bridge between an artist-driven movement and the perceptions and agency of their audience in the conversation about equity on stage.



<sup>1</sup> - We See You White American Theatre (2020); Asian American Performer's Action Coalition (2018); YYC Theatre Stats (2019); 35//50 Initiative (2020); Napoleão (2021)

# Participants

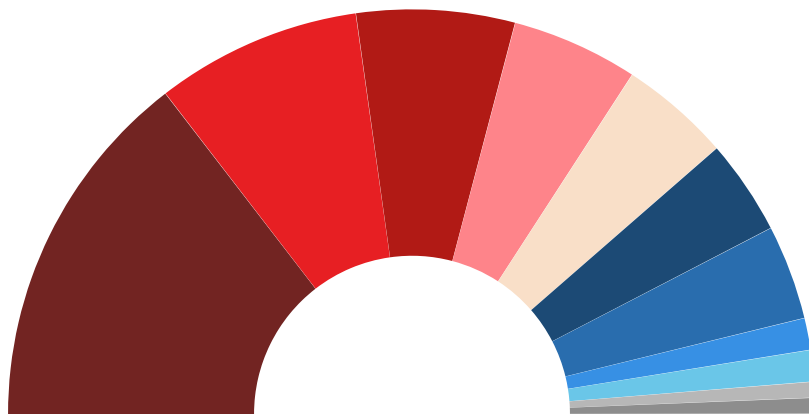
The target audience for this study was **theatre patrons who regularly attend live theatre in Edmonton**. The survey was advertised publicly and participation was voluntary. Qualitative data collected and analyzed in this report came from **51 participants** with the following self-reported demographics:

## Participant Demographics

**63%** identified with equity-seeking groups that have been linked to risk factors for marginalization <sup>2</sup>

**34%** self-identified as part of the dominant culture (cis-gendered, non-disabled, and white)

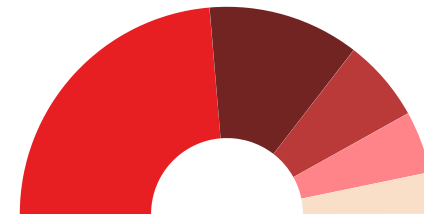
**3%** chose not to report demographics



- Female
- 2SLGBTQIA+
- Low-Income
- Marginalized by Body Standards (fat or plus-sized)
- Neurodivergent
- Part of the Disability Community
- Male
- Indigenous
- Immigrant or Refugee
- Black
- Non-binary

Many participants identified themselves in more than one category.

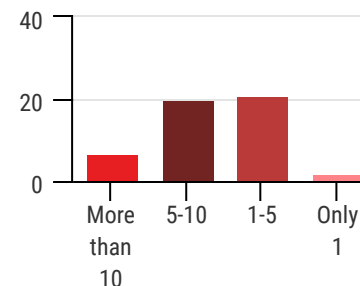
## How Participants Engage with Theatre



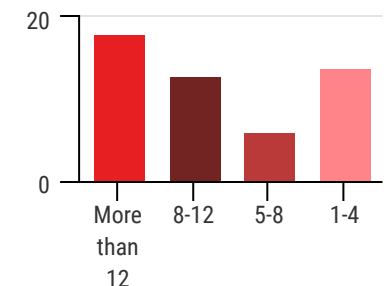
- Individual ticket buyers
- Pay-what-you-can attendees
- Volunteers
- Season Subscribers
- Staff

In a period of 12 months, participants purchase tickets from how many **different** theatre companies and to how many shows?

### Different Companies



### Number of Shows

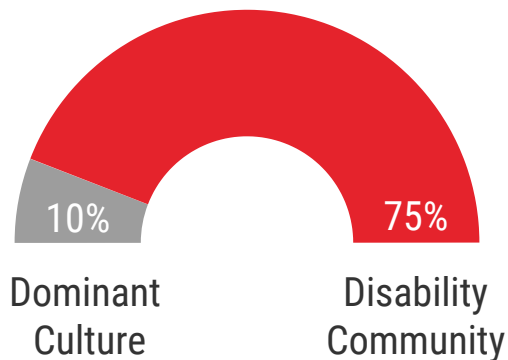


# Findings

## Accessibility

Among survey participants, respondents who identified with a disability were **65%** more likely to say they volunteer at the shows they see.

### "I Volunteer"



Comments suggested volunteering in exchange for free tickets makes theatre more accessible to those living on a fixed income, but not all theatres or volunteer positions are accessible to the disability community.<sup>3</sup>

“ As a larger person, often the seating accommodations at specific venues do not accommodate my needs and therefore I cannot attend certain performances.  
-Survey Participant

“ I rarely see someone who looks like me experiencing the story or being portrayed in any way other than as a joke or token character. After a while, you get to know which companies do (and do not) promote diversity in casting. As an audience it gets difficult to justify paying money to see the same people in the same type of role repeatedly.  
-Survey Participant

“ I think we all want to relate to the content we are watching in some way.  
-Survey Participant

### Patron comments demonstrated that theatre can be both:

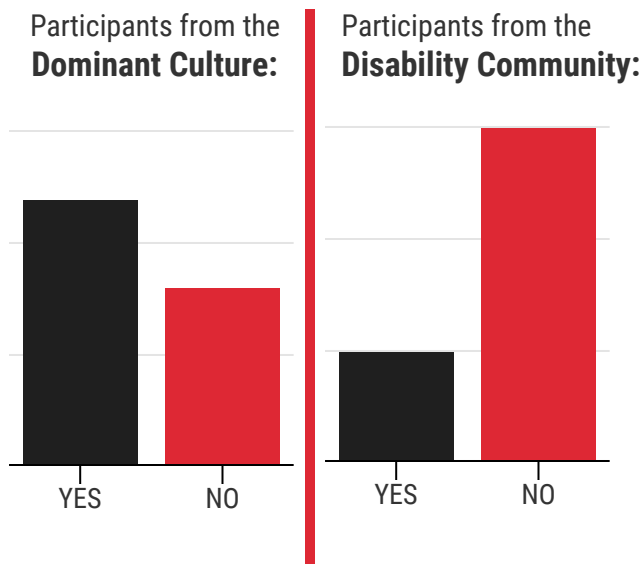
- **Physically inaccessible** (such as when the seats are too small or the space can't reasonably accommodate a wheelchair user)
- **Artistically inaccessible** (when the content of the play or use of harmful stereotypes alienates those from under-represented groups)

# Findings

## Representation

Nearly half of respondents felt representation on stage has greatly improved in the past several years, but this was **not** the case for respondents from the disability community.

### "Do you believe our local theatre reflects the greater community?"



Despite sentiments that things have improved in Edmonton, comments clearly stated a desire for more diversity in the content and presentation of theatre.

Survey participants called for **more Indigenous stories, queer stories, and disability** onstage. They wanted more **Black, Indigenous, POC, and body diverse performers** in all plays (including the classics). Multiple comments asked for more "happy theatre" that celebrates diversity instead of focusing on struggles.

“ [Where are the] stories about nurses or lab workers or the young immigrant mother searching for support? Stories of the muslim woman who's very happy to wear a hijab... the former rocket-scientist Russian cab driver? We [get] a lot of "great man / great person" and trauma theatre. I like more celebration of difference.   
 -Survey Participant

“ As a viewer I also want to see tall, short, fat, differently-able bodied people being represented.   
 -Survey Participant

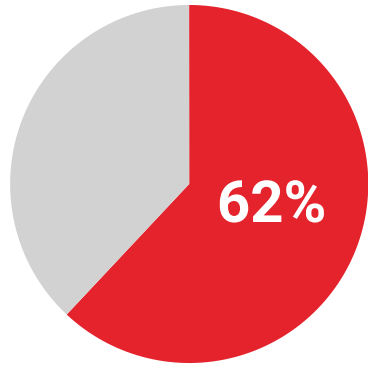
“ I'd like to see more women, of all colours. Still male dominated.   
 -Survey Participant

“ As a disabled person, I would say very rarely that I see a disabled actor on stage.   
 -Survey Participant

**Point of interest:** 33% of respondents reported being exclusively patrons, while the other 67% were theatre artists as well as patrons. The difference between responses from patrons who are primarily audience-members and those who are also theatre artists was too minimal to note. Therefore, patrons and theatre artists are generally making the same observations about equity in Edmonton's theatre presentation.

# Findings

## Agents of Change



62% of survey respondents believe publicly funded theatres should reflect the diversity present in the communities where they operate.

“ Media and public opinion also play a role in these decisions. -Survey Respondent

“ I seek out shows that represent me or my values. -Survey Respondent

### What **agency** do theatre patrons think they have to affect change?

To influence programming decisions at local theatres, respondents only mentioned **one** tactic: **They said they avoid companies who aren't practicing inclusion.** This tactic has limited influence because theatres don't know how many patrons they might be losing and why.

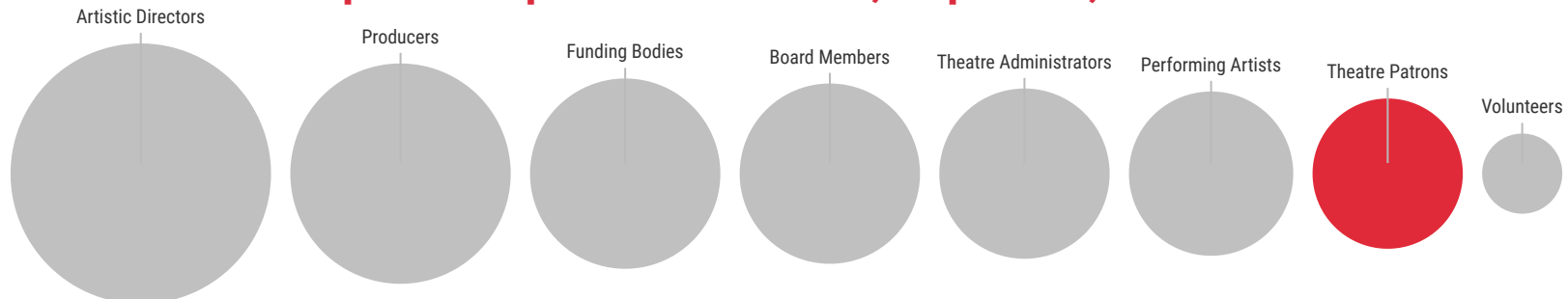
### Who *are* theatre companies accountable to?

- **Members & Directors:** Most established theatre companies in Alberta are incorporated under the Societies Act, which is designed to keep organizations accountable to their members. Societies report to a group of community volunteers (the board of directors). All members have voting privileges at governance meetings such as the Annual General Meeting (AGM) and members can call special meetings when they are unhappy with the direction of the organization.<sup>4</sup>
- **Funders & Donors:** Most theatre companies in Alberta are publicly funded by municipal, provincial, and federal grant programs with reporting requirements. They are also accountable to their donor base as they collect community donations.

4 - Muttart Foundation et al. (2009); Government of Alberta (2000)

## "Who can influence what we see on stage?"

Respondents placed themselves, as patrons, second last...



# Recommendations

YEG theatre patrons CAN influence art and culture in Edmonton. Here are a few ways you can exercise your agency:



## 1. Learn More:

Expand your knowledge using the resources linked in this report and elsewhere.



## 2. Communicate:

Use established feedback opportunities (like talk-back sessions) to tell companies what you want more of. Attend opening nights and annual general meetings to connect with leadership.



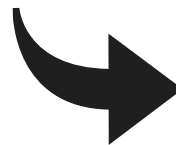
## 3. Participate:

Join a board of directors to bring your voice to the table.



## 4. Organize:

Gather a group of subscribers or volunteers to send a group message asking for fair representation.



Though encouragement for art to reflect the diversity of the community is good, it has to be done in a way that avoids tokenization or merely "checking off a box"

-Survey Participant



[It's] valuable to ask what individual communities need rather than [theatre companies] tokenizing communities to gain access to funding.

-Survey Participant

## Not sure how to join a board of directors?

Most theatre companies have contact information on their Board of Directors' webpage. If their application process isn't clear, reach out and ask if they're looking for board volunteers or how to become a member of the society.



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# Acknowledgements



**Transpose the Stage** is 100% volunteer run.

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This research was carried out in Treaty 6 Territory, a traditional gathering place for diverse Indigenous nations and the Métis Nation. It is in the spirit of our peace and friendship treaty that this project promotes equitable collaboration between peoples that is mutually beneficial. We are all treaty people.