

## **Aboriginal Artistic Leaders' Summit** ***Report and Analysis***

### **Introduction**

This paper is a report outlining the challenges and needs of the Aboriginal performing arts sector in Canada. It is in response to the recent Aboriginal Leaders' Summit held in Toronto on October 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> 2007. The conference was co-hosted by Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA) and the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance (IPAA).

### **Background**

In 2007 the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance (IPAA) – an organization that has struggled to stand alone and advocate on behalf of the larger Aboriginal performing arts community; was transferred from British Columbia under the direction of Full Circle to Ontario under its own jurisdiction with the direction from artistic leaders and board members with national representation. The organization co-sponsored the Artistic Leaders' Summit to unite key players and discuss the possibilities for strengthening its unification. The goal of the conference was two-fold; 1) to gather the board of directors and host the annual AGM and 2) to provide a national forum for exploration of the issues that affect the community as a whole, and through this, position IPAA as the collective voice to serve the larger Aboriginal performing arts sector in Canada.

### **Participants**

The participants at the conference included the newly elected board, staff and members of IPAA. There were also many other individual artists and supporters in attendance. In addition there were representatives from the Canada Council for the Arts and The Department of Canadian Heritage – (NATCP and APC) at some of the open sessions of the conference. The newly elected IPAA board comprises of eight elected members from across the country. They are listed as follows: Amanda Nahanee (Youth Representative), Donna Heimbecker (Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company), Yvette Nolan (Native Earth Performing Arts), Michelle Olson (Raven Spirit Dance), Karen Pheasant (National Aboriginal Dance Collective), Yvonne Chartrand (Compaigni V'ni Dansi), Ron Berti (De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Company) and Leonarda Carranza (Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble).

### **Canada Council for the Arts Involvement**

Although, the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) was invited to the conference and delivered a report on the Developmental Support Aboriginal Theatre Organizations (DSATO) program, they also requested for the community to provide immediate feedback on a study directed by CCA and coordinated and written by Marie Clements in December 2005. However after much deliberation, the community unanimously agreed that larger systemic issues needed to be addressed before feedback could be given on the recommendations in the report. This paper is one step in identifying the larger systemic issues which contribute to the instability, and moreover threaten the very survival of the Aboriginal performing art sector in Canada.

**Aboriginal Arts Secretariat with Canada Council for the Arts (CCA)**

A primary concern that participants expressed at the conference was the lack of advocacy within the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA). It was expressed that the current Aboriginal Arts Secretariat position does not adequately support the sector. For example requests for letters from the Secretariat to support Aboriginal performing art organizations in grants for operating funding are regularly denied. More recently, the participants were not informed consulted or invited to roundtable discussions that the Secretariat hosted. Furthermore, the Secretariat consulted with inappropriate sources (chiefs) for the roundtables that did take place. The general consensus was that chiefs were not the most suitable group to approach to inform the CCA on the Aboriginal performing arts sector. Participants also expressed deep concern for the artistic oversight of the Secretariat in general. Members wondered aloud about the fate of the artistic advisory committee that was established when the Secretariat was born. Some expressed concern about the lack of Aboriginal representation on decision making tables such as juries in the grant application process. A suggestion was to collectively define 'peer' as part of the peer assessment process; the definition would ensure that Aboriginal performing artists are included and increase their participation at the decision making tables in the future. It was also expressed that Aboriginal performing artists should be consulted in the development of grant criteria. Moreover, there is concern that CCA has no long-term vision for increasing Aboriginal participation in the performing arts. IPAA members expressed frustration in that little change has occurred in over 25 years. IPAA members also expressed an overwhelming need for an outside advocate to lobby for the groups' collective needs.

**Developmental Support to Aboriginal Theatre Organization (DSATO)**

Nevertheless, several participants of the Aboriginal performing arts sector did express sincere gratitude for the generous monetary contributions of the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA), and its efforts to improve the current funding system through the creation of the DSATO program. Furthermore, the report written by Marie Clements in December 2005 was regarded as a great contribution to the current and limited written work about Native theatre in Canada. The report was highly regarded and consensus was that it provided the community with a better understanding of unique history of Aboriginal theatre in Canada, and the current constraints on the Aboriginal performing arts sector. While these efforts were acknowledged, some participants at the summit did question the limited scope of the study. For example, the study focused more on the DSATO program than the systemic issues within the larger government funding structures. Other participants questioned the dissemination of the report in a timely manner. It was agreed that CCA should seriously reconsider the effectiveness of the DSATO program entirely.

Participants also asked whether over the years the CCA has increased overall funding dedicated to Aboriginal organizations or if it has merely redistributed existing funds within the system. Participants also expressed a concern with the current lack of operational budgets available to Aboriginal companies. Others wanted to better understand the benchmarks, in which Aboriginal organizational applicants are measured against. Some participants questioned whether it was fair to compare Aboriginal organizations to mainstream organizations. Artistic leaders also expressed concern on the

impacts of CCA cutting off Aboriginal organizations with long-standing programs. Artistic leaders candidly shared the inhumanity of funding cuts. Without DSATO providing long-term funding agreements to organization, the volatile nature of the funding system forces Aboriginal companies to be the mercy of funders, who can at any time, cut off their funding. These cuts not only cause immense pain and heartache to the communities that rely on them, they also jeopardize the Aboriginal organization's trust and credibility at the community level.

### **Support for Long-Standing Companies**

The overwhelming consensus among participants at the conference was the need for more adequate financial support from government(s) to sustain and equalize the playing field in order for the Aboriginal performing arts sector to survive for the next generation. The general consensus was that the current fragmented funding system makes access to funding extremely challenging for Aboriginal companies. Long standing companies have to apply to up to 20 different grants annually (including grants with strict contribution agreements) in order to survive. Since these companies create the foundation of the Aboriginal performing arts sector, and smaller Aboriginal companies heavily rely on them, their instability undermines the Aboriginal performing arts sector as a whole. Furthermore, unlike mainstream companies, Aboriginal companies obtain little to no corporate or private sector financial support. Furthermore, Aboriginal companies do not have enough resources to make time or pay someone to fundraise for them. This reality leaves the Aboriginal performing art sector in a constant cycle of depression and dependency. The agreement at the conference was for IPAA to advocate to government for a significant investment into the Aboriginal performing arts sector by providing long-term core funding to the four more established performing arts companies. These companies include; Native Earth Performing Arts, Full Circle, Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company and De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Group.

### **Stabilizing the Sector**

This funding would level the playing field and stabilize the whole sector by providing long-standing companies with funding to support the establishment of their own facilities, ability to hire a core human resource through an ideal 4-6 full-time staff, and the ability to offer permanent and adequately paid positions, which would directly affect retention of core employees. This support would also give companies breathing room and empower them to become more proactive rather than reactive in their programming schedules. For example the Aboriginal performing arts sector would like to begin collaborating rather than competing with each other. Collaboration could take place though the planning of a national touring network, however without adequate funding, this type of cooperation is not currently possible, and forces the sector into a different collective competitive dynamic. Essentially, through a significant investment into the long standing Aboriginal performing arts companies and their infrastructures, government(s) would ensure the sustainability of the sector as a whole.

### **Investing in Human Resources**

Currently the way the arts funding system is structured, the energy and commitment required to keep an Aboriginal performing arts company alive is nearly impossible with the lack of funding for human resources available to each company. Aboriginal leaders are therefore burning out quickly by being understaffed and forced to dedicate enormous amounts of time, energy and cheap or unpaid labor to keep their companies operating in the non-profit arts sector. After 25 years, long-standing theatre companies are still struggling to get ahead with inadequate infrastructures and lack of core funding, which force them to be understaffed and sometimes work in hostile and unhealthy working conditions. Moreover, Aboriginal companies cannot afford to pay their employees adequately, and therefore suffer the consequences through high attrition rates. The Hill Strategies Research Inc's report (Feb. 2005) *Diversity in Canada's Arts Labour Force: An Analysis of 2001 Census Data* states that the annual income of Aboriginal artists is significantly lower when compared to other artists. The research indicates that Aboriginal artists earn 29% less than other artists on average \$16,866 compared to \$23,489. Above the typical lack of core funding, Aboriginal artistic leaders require a complex set of skills from administrative to managerial skills; they also require a certain cultural knowledge and competency. Essentially, the Indigenous cultural knowledge is not valued in the mainstream funding system, which does not recognize cultural managers as having a distinct set of skills, which are of value in the economics of human capital. Essentially, government funding agencies must respond by reconsidering to the unique needs of the Aboriginal performing arts sector and the core cultural competencies to support it.

### **Building the Next Generation**

The conference delegates spent some time discussing ways to attract and retain the next generation of Aboriginal leaders in the performing arts sector. It was identified that the next generation of leaders expect more than ever before. The cycle of under funded organizations makes it increasingly difficult to attract, train, mentor, develop and retain new people. Participants at the conference said that organizations need to be flexible and nurture the leader as well as the artist; since many emerging Aboriginal leaders are both inter-changeably.

It was also suggested that the sector as a whole work together to serve the leaders of tomorrow by arranging for internships across the sector with different companies as part of the larger network. It was suggested that organizations promote summer employment and internship exchanges. However, the Aboriginal performing arts sector faces unique challenges in accessing employment and training dollars for students and interns. There have been recent changes in government policy regarding First Nation peoples' access to federal employment and training dollars. Currently, if you are First Nation off-reserve you can only receive employment and training support from Aboriginal Human Resource Development Canada (AHRDC) office, however if you are on-reserve you can only access this from the First Nation Loan Delivery Mechanism (LDM). Therefore, First Nations people cannot go to a regional Human Resource Development (HRD) office and submit an application. Moreover, there is immense competition for employment and training dollars at the First Nation community level, where there is pressure to keep the dollars at home in the community. For example, at the on-reserve First Nation level,

communities have been reluctant to send on-reserve students out of the community for training. Furthermore, the current funding structures prevent Aboriginal companies or schools from submitting applications for Aboriginal students out of province. Ultimately, the unique employment and training funding structures impose hoops and barriers, in which Aboriginal performing art organizations have to contend with. This is yet another example of the unique challenges that the Aboriginal performing arts sector faces.

### **Touring Network**

Artistic leaders at the conference also expressed the need for more collaboration and communication between companies across the country. A suggestion was to create a national touring network to support the productions of companies and student training development. This network would give legs to productions, many of which are new works that could and should be seen by many markets. A national touring network would also unify the Aboriginal performing arts sector by supporting companies and artists, so that they feel less isolated and a part of a national professional Aboriginal performing arts community. The value of an annual or biannual national/international showcasing platform would inevitably strengthen and support the growth of the Aboriginal performing arts sector.

### **Aboriginal Performing Art Education**

Aboriginal organizations that train performing artists experience unique challenges in the Aboriginal performing art sector. On top of the insufficient funding issues raised above, they also experience other curriculum, programming and student service challenges. For example without proper accreditation, schools with full-time programs lack the credibility to compete with mainstream schools. The suggestion to define accreditation on our own terms was proposed, since schools are being measured against European western models and standards. Schools also attested to having to face the lack of financial support from First Nations, Chiefs and Councils, and Local Delivery Mechanisms (LDM's) and other funding programs to support students' tuition and living expenses. Therefore, a large amount of funding from these organizations ends up supporting the students living expenses, rather than being invested in to facilities, faculty and the production of new works.

The undervaluing of the quality of Aboriginal performing arts education in Canada is also a reality that deeply affects the perceptions within and outside the Aboriginal performing arts sector. It was also identified that the Aboriginal performing arts sector needs to educate both mainstream and the Aboriginal community about the value of performing arts training. Essentially, student graduates build a variety of skills including cultural knowledge such as; traditional storytelling, teachings, song and dance. Above the cultural components, students receive technical training in movement, voice work, acting methods, clowning, stage combat etc. This hybrid approach to education helps students cultivate discipline, creativity, flexibility, confidence and commitment. Students also learn how work independently and collaboratively among many other intra-personal skills, which have significant impacts on their personal lives and career livelihoods.

### **Student Needs**

Furthermore, Aboriginal students who attend these programs often face unique challenges. Many students have dependents and families to support and the lack of funding exacerbates the obstacles that they face on a daily basis. Many Aboriginal students lack an appropriate entry point into mainstream assimilated contexts, therefore students turn to the Aboriginal performing arts sector to get their training in a more culturally sensitive learning environment. Training requires a level of discipline and personal consistency that must be internalized before the student can begin to succeed in a self-sustaining way. Training companies often spend time, energy and resources hiring counsellors and Elders to support students emotionally and culturally, through the transition.

While lack of financial support negatively impacts Aboriginal students' success in education in general, academic literature suggests that Aboriginal specific services and programs increase success rates in education. Traditional Aboriginal teaching styles are an important aspect of many of the Aboriginal companies and training programs teaching philosophies. These educational approaches base themselves on observation and modeling a skill set until it is firmly acquired and internalized in a sustainable way by the learner. Aboriginal performing art training organizations have also found that their programs support students in bridging in to the mainstream arts sector later on. On one hand, the Aboriginal programs mirror the social structure and learning models of their original community based foundations; on another they take a hybrid approach while introducing students to mainstream theatre methods. Aboriginal performing arts programs do all of this without sacrificing Indigenous ways of knowing. The dynamic of this hybrid approach tends not to be based in hierarchy, but rather arriving at consensus throughout most layers of the organizations. Aboriginal faculty and teachers are most beneficial to Aboriginal students and may be qualified in cultural ways that are not always recognized by the mainstream.

### **Collaboration between Training Organizations**

Like Aboriginal performing art companies, organizations that train artists expressed a need to collaborate more with each other. Areas of interest were; understanding and sharing each other curriculum and models of education, and sharing resources and faculty contacts. Organizations also expressed a need to do a longitudinal investigation of their programs, services and alumni to see where students go after their programs. It was noticed that many students in Aboriginal performing art training programs within the sector return to their First Nations communities to deliver theatre and dance programs at the community level. It has been noted that the long standing companies within the Aboriginal performing arts sector, act as a feeder pool for these smaller community based companies. A better understanding of the complex interdependencies between larger and smaller companies and program can contribute to working together in the future. The recommendation was to hire a full time position to serve all the training companies and support the connectivity and increase understanding and cooperation amongst each other.

### **Alliance and Advocacy**

Artistic leaders at the summit unanimously agreed that the Aboriginal performing arts sector needs a central body external to any funding agency to serve its best interests. The need for a collective voice to speak on behalf of the Aboriginal performing arts community was discussed and the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance (IPAA) was identified as the most suitable organization to support the community in this role and capacity.

### **Funding for IPAA**

A central need identified at the summit conference was securing funding to support IPAA in establishing itself as an Aboriginal Service Organization (ASO) with the sustained resources to address the myriad of challenges, and reflect the broad scope relevant to its membership. This financial support would be made in a request for an immediate infusion of funds in the amount of \$150,000 dollars annually, so that IPAA can sustain its ongoing consultation with the larger community, and move on initiatives beginning with a national strategic planning session in the immediate future. As an IPAA member representing a group of companies and artists, a parallel recommendation is made to provide support to the National Aboriginal Dance Collective in the amount of \$50,000 annually.

### **IPAA Strategic Planning**

The national strategic planning session would invite the larger Aboriginal performing art sector and IPAA members together to establish a short-term (3-5 years) and long-term (25 years) plan to address the sustainability of Aboriginal performing arts in Canada. This conference would occur within the next 3-6 months. A draft strategic plan would be created in advance, and would be proposed and delivered at the next conference, which would aim at revising and approving the final plan(s). It was suggested that the event take place in Vancouver and coincide with Full Circle's Talking Stick festival in February 2008. It was also suggested that IPAA hire a facilitator to help guide and keep the group focused in delivering the strategic plan. Some members requested that language interpreter(s) in French and Spanish be available should IPAA members request them. More consultation with IPAA members will take place to support the scheduling and planning of this conference.

### **Systemic Marginalization**

Currently the governments' national and provincial arts and culture funding structures force Aboriginal companies into categorical boxes, which are insufficient in meeting Aboriginal peoples' unique needs. Forcing Aboriginal performing art companies into Western mainstream systems is seriously problematic, and deserves complete reconsideration when dealing with Aboriginal people in today's contemporary context. Essentially, the current system was built to serve more established mainstream companies, and through time has responded to the needs of mainstream. However, it is important to recognize that historically, the relationship between government(s) and Aboriginal people in Canada has not been positive. Aboriginal participation in the arts until more recently was almost non-existent, and arguably due to marginalization in the system, Aboriginal participation is still minimal. The unchecked expectation that

Aboriginal art practitioners fit into guidelines set by mainstream models is a colonial encounter, which serves the interest of those in power, and systemically undermines Aboriginal people who are forced to work within it. Unfortunately, government funding structures have done little to respond to the unique needs of Aboriginal people in the arts sector. Ultimately, IPAA's role will be identifying and articulating the barriers that impede Aboriginal peoples' success in the current art sector, and advocating for solutions for its membership.

### **Western Structures**

The traditional mainstream board structure was one example highlighted at the conference that demonstrates how western models of governance do not necessarily serve the unique needs of Aboriginal organizations in the performing art sector. At the conference, some companies expressed that the lack of participation of some board members make it increasingly difficult to operate efficiently. Due to the lack of human resources, other organizations expressed that it was easy to overwork their board members, because there is so much work to get done. There was also a suggestion that Aboriginal organizations consider returning to Indigenous forms/structures of governance and/or rework the current mainstream model to suit the unique cultural needs of Aboriginal people. Some organizations have already developed successful hybrid models that integrate the most effective mechanisms of both traditional and contemporary practices, in areas ranging from governance to operations, from training to creative process. However, there has been no effective means or climate to share and exchange our learning with each other directly and personally. After the conference, one member in particular expressed an interest in working on a sub-committee to research alternative Indigenous structures of governance to bring back to the larger group at a later date.

### **Attitudinal Realities**

Unfortunately with the inadequate core funding and lack of infrastructures, Aboriginal companies are often left to depend on mainstream companies for space and resources. These companies do not necessarily understand the Aboriginal performing arts sector's struggle. There also appears to be a general misconception that Aboriginal performing art companies get 'special consideration' in the funding process. The need to re-educate and debunk the myths that exists would support the Aboriginal performing art sector, as Aboriginal artists face this misconception on almost on a daily basis. It is believed that the misconception of 'special consideration' is partly due to the clause that many funder(s) include in their application processes. For example 'all Canada Arts Council programs are accessible to Aboriginal artists or arts organizations and artists and arts organizations from diverse cultural and regional communities of Canada'. Although, the clause is meant to invite Aboriginal organizations and artists to apply, they give the impression that Aboriginal artists get 'special consideration' even though this is not the case. Nevertheless, the need to re-educate mainstream society is increasingly important, as Aboriginal people exert their sovereign right to obtain the means to express themselves through the performing arts.

### **Aboriginal Rights to Performance Culture**

This report in many ways is premised on the belief that Aboriginal performing arts in Canada is a sovereign right of Aboriginal people to have the means to live out our inherent worldviews. The worldviews of Aboriginal people are firmly based in an oral culture, and performing art heavily relies on breath and body to tell stories. Ultimately, government and mainstream society must begin to recognize Aboriginal peoples' rights to have the means to culture and heritage. This acknowledgement and financial commitment is deeply rooted in an understanding of equity and social justice, which embraces the notion of self-determination. The right of Aboriginal people as the original inhabitants of this land to express themselves through performing arts is an important aspect of the advocacy, in which IPAA will use to move the collective forward.

### **Intellectual Property Rights**

Furthermore, it is arguable that Aboriginal performing art is an intellectual property. From the perspective of the international framework that governs intellectual property, the categories are broad, flexible, evolutionary and adaptive. According to the definition announced at the Convention Establishing the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), intellectual property include rights relating to:

1. literary, artistic and scientific works
2. **performances of performing artists**, phonograms, and broadcasts
3. inventions in all fields of human endeavor
4. scientific discoveries
5. industrial designs
6. trademarks, service marks, and commercial names and designations
7. protection against unfair competition
8. and all other rights resulting from intellectual activity in the industrial, scientific, literary or artistic fields.

### **The Sector is Distinct from Mainstream**

Another important premise in this report is that the Aboriginal performing art sector in Canada is distinct from the mainstream art sector. It is safe to say that all the Aboriginal performing art companies ascribe to a unique approach which is strongly based in a cultural understanding of Aboriginal people. Essentially, Aboriginal performing art is a unique and culturally distinct sector that should not be included or lumped into mainstream and/or diversity plans or programs. Furthermore, the Aboriginal performing art sector should have the inherent right to define itself, determine its criteria and requirements and rely on the fiduciary relationship with the rest of Canada to ensure that these needs are met.

**Diversity in the Sector**

While the Aboriginal performing art sector is distinct, there are a wide range of Aboriginal nations across this country, which makes the sector increasingly complex in of itself. Furthermore, Aboriginal organizations that operate off reserve in urban setting take a much different approach than on-reserve community based organizations. Therefore, the Aboriginal performing art sector cannot take a single approach or model to delivering its services and programs. Above the diverse cultural understandings of tribal nations across the country, there are varying degrees of cultural politics, which play out in the sector. Some of these politics are informed by the organizations cultural contexts for example an urban company may need to take a pan-Indian approach in its programming, whereas an on-reserve company may be in a position to take on a more distinct cultural model that relates to the community it is located in. Essentially, the diversity of the Aboriginal performing art sector in Canada needs to be further examined in order to adequately understand its complexities and properly service its collective needs.