

Homesteading a New Queer Frontier:
Queering Performance and Cultivating Community from Outside the Centre

by Richie Wilcox and Jay Whitehead

"It's something of a miracle Theatre Outré exists at all: a vital queer theatre company, with a year-round facility, in the middle of the Albertan Badlands. They are more than a cultural space in Lethbridge; they are a paradigm shift." - Jordan Tannahill

Lethbridge, Alberta is a small city of around one-hundred thousand residents nestled in the rolling coulees and prairie grasslands of Southern Alberta. It is the fourth largest city in the province and is known as much for its staunch religious and political conservatism as it is for its relentless prairie winds and warming winter chinooks. The city was founded as a town in the late nineteenth century as a coal mining community and remains to this day mostly blue collar, with a community of honest, "salt of the earth," productive people working in agriculture, industry and the public sector. Lethbridge sits in what is often considered the most unchangeably right-of-centre regions of Canada but contains a hidden dichotomy. Just as it buries its unique and interesting past as the last city in North America to shutter its once popular red-light district, boasting thriving brothels open and active well into the mid-twentieth century, it hides, from those less familiar with the city, a blooming counterculture grounded in the hard working arts and academic communities. In the midst of the city's conservative core comprised of many strict religious communities including larger than average populations of Mormons, Hutterites and Dutch Reform congregations, sits a liberal arts university with areas of study including fine arts, sociology, women's studies and other humanities which help to infuse the city with liberal pockets of thought, politics and artistic practice that is only recently beginning to reach its full potential and is growing to create an ever evolving counterculture who's fervent need to be

“counter” in this conservative stronghold is only augmented by the traditional reputation of the place it exists in.

Also emerging from the shadows in the past several years is an increasingly visible queer community: Queers in Lethbridge, like in cities across the continent of similar size and demographics, are marching bravely in recent years into a new queer frontier full of potential and necessity, outside of the country’s major urban centres who more and more see arts, culture and events like Pride as corporate sponsorship opportunities or simply another weekend out in the “gaybourhood.” Instead, these small city queers, these “Fairies on the Prairies” like Laura Ingalls herself, are proverbially prancing through wildrose country, with their sisters in tow, celebrating Pride and diversity for important political and social reasons beyond an excuse to wear that new tank top. And at the forefront of this movement, in this small conservative community of Lethbridge, is our emerging queer theatre company fully taking advantage of the fertile climate here for queerly homesteading new opportunities for change: Theatre Outré.

Only four short years ago the queer scene in Lethbridge was one stuck in the past; one in which a big city dweller could be thrown back decades when confronted with the closeted characteristics encouraged, whether it be benignly or unknowingly, by the queer organizations and events of the day. The local gay organization Outreach would produce, at that time, bi-monthly dances which certainly had the intention of bringing together the community, but the location of these dances was a key factor in deterring the community from uniting and from feeling any sort of pride about their sexuality and themselves. The dances were located at a Croatian Hall rented out cheaply for the occasion. The building itself was outside of city limits down a long dirt road with no streetlights. The mysterious and unknown night cloaked people in

darkness and hid them from public view. This drive that placed everyone in a private and segregated world was not liberating or tantalizing in a naughty sense - it was shaming. The location inherently communicated to people: “it is okay to be part of the queer community but we need to be in the shadows to be safe”. The entire function was catering to people who did not want to be out or seen as gay because of one major emotion - fear. Only a few years before people had to know a password in order to be allowed into the dance as a safety precaution. The city of Lethbridge did not have a consistent queer positive space downtown and there were little to no signs of queer culture visible in the city. Information and communication was predominantly transmitted through online forums, social media and phone applications such as Grindr and Scruff. The physical gathering of the queer community was almost non-existent and when it did occur it was behind closed doors. The Pride organization did not have a march or parade at this time either. While the queer population was very present in Lethbridge in 2012 it was covert to the point of being invisible. Enter Theatre Outré.

Theatre Outré has its earliest roots about fifteen years ago when as a politically motivated, if naïve undergraduate student in the theatre department at the University of Lethbridge, Jay Whitehead, set out to create a small queer performance event in town. He booked a small acting classroom for the event, rallied like-minded student performers and sold \$5 tickets for the cabaret called: *Pretty Witty & Gay*. The show sold out and filled to capacity with a diverse student and community audience. This was the very first inkling that there was an audience for theatre that represented sexual minorities in a place as seemingly unlikely as Lethbridge, Alberta.

When Whitehead returned to Lethbridge years later, he was delighted to find that *Pretty, Witty & GAY* had become entrenched as an anticipated annual event in the cultural landscape of this small conservative city. He quickly jumped back on board and became involved in the event once again. In the years since that time *Pretty, Witty & GAY* has now grown to become Theatre Outré's flagship event. What once was a terrified undergraduate queer's intended singular experiment in a community wherein he felt invisible, has now become a week-long celebration of sexual diversity and hedonism that reliably sells out.

Pretty, Witty & GAY, however, was operating on a small scale long before Theatre Outré as an official company and registered theatre society was first conceived. The formation of the company didn't actually happen until January of 2012 when theatre director Richie Wilcox and his husband, Aaron Collier, a sound designer and musician moved to Southern Alberta. When we first met (having recently been hired to teach alongside each other as faculty members at the University of Lethbridge) it became clear very quickly to us all that here were artists whose personal and creative values aligned and whose skill sets complimented each other. We were quick to collaborate on the potential of a queer theatre company, which we named Theatre Outré, in our new small-city prairie home, and we hit the ground running at full speed almost immediately.

Having lived and worked in bigger cities, it was evident to us both that rental space was incredibly cheap in a city like Lethbridge. Consequently, we rented a room on the third floor atop a historic downtown building above a pub and an art gallery for \$600/month. The space was small and intimate, able to seat about 30 patrons. The impetus to operate our own space came from examples being set by theatre artists in larger centres who were following DIY trends

including the undertaking of media darlings Jordan Tannahill and Will Ellis and their very successful experiment with their Toronto space: Videofag. The rented space in Lethbridge, which we named Bordello, was dilapidated, had no air conditioning, the toilets clogged and when it rained the roof leaked. But people were excited about the space and about the work we were doing. A buzz about this mysterious new queer space built primarily through word of mouth and social media efforts.

The name Bordello emerged due to the fact that the building the space occupied was rumoured to have been a brothel during Lethbridge's little known, previously mentioned history with prostitution during the gold rush and mining years. With successful original productions such as *UNSEX'd*, which had been co-written by Whitehead and Daniel Judes, and *The Drinking Game* as a co-production with Halifax' DaPoPo Theatre, as well as numerous musical and drag cabaret nights, Theatre Outré and our space, Bordello, quickly gained momentum in town and the small intended performance venue was evolving into a celebrated de facto "gay bar" for the community. As such Theatre Outré rapidly outgrew our first venue.

We found our second and current space shortly after the onset of 2014. A previous dance studio in a well-appointed building, with a working thermostat, flushable toilets and double the capacity, became available and, as a company, we decided the extra rent was worth the sacrifice for better, larger and more accessible facilities; although more expensive than the first space, rent was still remarkably affordable at \$1500 a month. We invested a great deal of time, energy, money and volunteer hours into the renovation of the new space and brought the name Bordello with us; however, we were no longer sharing the space with a pub and an art gallery. Our new neighbours were conservative business owners and it didn't take long for word to reach us,

through our landlord, that these new neighbours were not at all happy to share a building with a ‘Bordello,’ a name, which for some reason, they took to be literal. Consequently, after a highly public and traumatic battle with everyone from our new neighbours, to Lethbridge City Hall, we relented and changed the name of the new venue to Club Didi, named for Whitehead’s popular local drag character who frequently hosted events there.

In the handful of years since founding the company and its accompanying venue, Theatre Outré has produced full and robust seasons of theatre including plays by celebrated queer Canadian playwrights (*The Birth of Casper G. Schmidt* by Sky Gilbert, *Late Company* by Jordan Tannahill), renowned international playwrights (*A Thought in Three Parts* by Wallace Shawn) and world premier productions of new plays by local and nationally recognized playwrights (*White Gleaming Beach* by Greg MacArthur, *How To Leave* by Liam Monaghan, *Castrati: An Electro Drag Opera* by Whitehead, Wilcox, Collier and Kathy Zaborsky). Theatre Outré has also toured their original work including *UNSEX’d* and *Castrati* to cities across Canada and abroad proving that a city like Lethbridge can sustain theatre that is not only timely, but incredibly outré in content and form. The company’s location has also proven a remarkably fertile and inspirational laboratory to create experimental work without the necessity of pleasing sponsors, the media, or reviewers and to have the financial freedom to take risks and tour them to locations outside of our base city.

With cheap rent and a small space to fill, as well as a wealth of local talent constantly funnelling out of fine arts programs at the local University, producing theatre in Lethbridge is remarkably less daunting than one might expect. Resources have proven readily available through donations from community members, sponsorship from local small businesses and

loaned theatre equipment including lighting, set pieces, props and costumes from the University and other local theatre groups. In a small community like Lethbridge, where these resources already exist, they are more accessible and available than in cities that might be burdened by larger demand due to more crowded theatre communities and higher rental fees. Lethbridge also boasts a “small town” feel wherein everyone knows everyone or is a friend of a friend at the very least, and finding materials and willing labour to produce professional calibre theatre at affordable rates is relatively easy. There is, in a small city like this, less competition for advertising, sponsorship and resources, and since the nearest large city is in excess of two-hundred kilometres away from downtown Lethbridge, there is also a strong a desire to see quality theatre produced for a community who feels underrepresented at home.

Additionally, the freedom to create theatre in Lethbridge that is provocative, outré, experimental and daring with content including extreme sexual situations, strong language, nudity, violence and queer themes is something that can not be understated. The city of Lethbridge has little to no entertainment journalism and its only local newspaper employs no arts or theatre reviewers to speak of. At a time when theatre companies in larger cities lament the loss of theatre critics and rely so heavily on that elusive four-star review to help sell tickets to pay for inflated downtown performance venues, Theatre Outré thrives artistically, and has for years, in an environment wherein our artistic output is rarely, if ever, held up for scrutiny by local media agents. There is tremendous freedom in such an environment to create theatre and art without judgement or fear of getting panned by analytical critiques.

The first major show produced by our company, and to be reviewed outside of our community, is the play *UNSEX'd*, written by Jay Whitehead and Daniel Judes. The play tells the

story of two Shakespearean boy players in a reimagined Shakespearean England duking it out to originate the role of Lady Macbeth in the Bard's new "Scottish Play." The writing and staging of the piece is inspired by unapologetically queer entertainment icons and historical practices including Sky Gilbert, drag performance, Shakespeare, *All About Eve* and Charles Ludlum's Theatre of the Ridiculous. Creating the production in the uncynical vacuum that is Lethbridge proved a testing ground for what was to come for Theatre Outré. Working in isolation from any geographic location that had ever seen queer theatre of this ilk or many of the show's inspirations proved to be a most rewarding artistic experience and because of the necessity of selling no more than thirty tickets a night to fill the theatre there was little pressure to create a show that was a "safe bet" or easily marketable. With an entirely local company of actors, crew and designers the show opened to much celebration and praise in Lethbridge and sold remarkably well being bolstered by word of mouth alone. The show has since garnered interest from more established queer theatre companies across the country, being presented by Calgary's Third Street Theatre, Vancouver's Frank Theatre, Toronto's Buddies in Bad Times Theatre and played at the International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival. Our safe bubble, void of media scrutiny, however, was threatened on these sojourns out of our cozy little community. One perplexing review of *UNSEX'd* by Calgary critic Jessica Goldman, for instance, didn't understand the camp sensibility of the play or its crude humour and she panned the production for what she wanted it to be rather than for what it was saying that "obvious raunch and tiresome camp trampled what could have been a fun, smart play." Her tweets continued, going as far as to ask "is there such a thing as a gay play? I think not" simply because she herself was unaware of the rich history in queer culture of using camp and raunch as artistic, social and political tools. Had *UNSEX'd* not already

had a vibrant and rewarding run at home in Lethbridge, its easy to imagine that a harsh review like this, from someone with the potential to deter audiences from attending, might have motivated us to alter the show to win public favour or to abandon the project altogether for something more broadly accessible. Having been protected from such analysis at home, we were safe from any such distraction to our true artistic vision and were able to take the show as far as our imaginations and our respect of queer theatre history would take us. Since then this gay, vulgar, camp fantasia that is *UNSEX'd*, created in the isolated bubble of small-city Lethbridge, untouched by media pontification, has flourished on continued tours to cities and festivals from coast to coast and beyond to many positive reviews, which for us is flattering, but we see that as the icing on the cake that we've already enjoyed at home. Theatre Outré produces fast and produces often. Our space is a laboratory and we present our experiments frequently to live audiences hungry for representation in their own community with little to no financial or critical risk; and the resulting work, in terms of quality, as evidenced by interest in our work from outside of Lethbridge, has not been affected negatively by working in these rare, artistically fertile and freeing conditions.

It's fruitful to compare and contrast the Theatre Outré experience with the developing years of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre as it shows the similarities in philosophies that have popped up over 30 years later in our relatively rural setting. As stated on their website, then artistic director Sky Gilbert brought forth a vision for Buddies "that was unapologetically political, fiercely pro-sexual and fundamentally anti-establishment". A look at this trio of values in further detail is necessary in order to analyze Theatre Outré's status as *the* counterculture in Lethbridge.

The act of being “unapologetically political” in Alberta does not necessarily take much: a liberal thought can be looked at as an act of rebellion by some. Outré is “to violate convention or propriety; pass the bounds of what is usual; out of the common course or limits; bizarre; outlandish; extravagant; queer”. Our mandate continues to proclaim our mission against the status quo as “we seek to provide an uncensored and uncompromising voice to those in our community who are often considered to exist beyond the fringes of social propriety, sexual norms and gendered expectations”. We present theatre content that is not only considered ‘alternative’ in the theatre community but labeled ‘alternative as a whole by society. Shows such as our original production of *Castrati: An Electro Drag Opera* feature a hybrid of theatre, media, ritual and performance art that challenges the viewers aesthetically but also challenges the audience with brutally open discussions and representations of sexuality, gender, nudity, and more.

Buddies in Bad Times was known, and is perhaps still known, for being “fiercely pro-sexual”. Their “infamous dungeon parties” allowed people to come to the venue to experiment with S/M. The company is likely one of the only major Canadian theatre companies whose former artistic directors would post nude and sexual pictures/videos of themselves on the internet. Theatre Outré’s work is embedded in sex and body positivity. The surrounding conservative environment most likely helps drive us to further extremes in that regard to counter the status quo. Our production of *A Thought in Three Parts*, for example, featured all nude performers simulating various sex acts onstage: on their own, in pairs and in groups. We are continuing to delve into ideas revolving around sex and fetish with our new play in development, *Tab & Landon*. The play is set in the 1970s and examines the relationship of twin brothers who

perform in porn films together in the genre known as ‘Twincest’. In the same vein as Bruce LaBruce’s canon or in films such as *Shortbus* and *Lie With Me*, this play will feature previously recorded scenes projected onto the stage showcasing the actors performing actual sexual acts with each other. While laws forbid live sex shows, we are interested pushing the boundaries of social propriety and questioning why such things are off limits in our time?

The space we run also serves as a gay bar known as Club Didi, which is not unlike the Buddies model with their space Tallulah’s Cabaret. We hold many club events that uphold our body and sex positivity philosophy. We host a monthly dance called Panti Raid where people can feel comfortable partying in their underwear. Another event similar to this is Strip Spelling Bee. The participants of it can be anyone and everyone. The support of bodies and the respect afforded bodies of all types within these two events alone makes a big difference in the mentality and attitudes of our community.

Lastly, an ongoing art exhibit in our space must be mentioned that speaks to our ‘fiercely pro-sexual’ beliefs succinctly and powerfully: an art project entitled The Junk Booth. Basically, patrons of the space are invited at any time to go into the Junk Booth, a small partitioned space, to take an anonymous picture of their anatomy (whichever part they want), and drop it into a locked box. The pictures are later displayed proudly, pinned to bulletin boards that live by the bar, or, if they are so honoured, they are framed in one of the several collages of “junk” that adorn the space. The act of taking these photos for some people in our community is sometimes a big hurdle to jump, although the release and liberty of showing off your ‘junk’ to others (even if it is anonymous) helps people accept themselves more fully and encourages them to love their bodies both mentally and physically.

The third value I'd like to analyze stresses the stance of "fundamentally anti-establishment". This one is tougher to follow through on. Thinking of establishment in a literal way, we started out buying one-off liquor licenses, had no business license, no occupancy load, no sponsorships and no official lease. But just as Buddies ended up where it is today, we have definitely fallen into the bureaucracy of it all and jumped through the necessary hoops. We have always been a registered society as Theatre Outre but because of the 'club' part of the space we now have a business license to run a private club titled Club Didi. We have an official annual liquor licence that took months to obtain and because of this license we have to sell food (which we overprice so it won't actually sell). We have an occupancy load of 60 people in our space which we tend to strictly abide by because it's not necessarily the area where we choose to push the envelope – we pick our battles. Technically any nudity in our space is supposed to occur onstage with a legally determined number of metres between performers and audience, and no nudity is allowed amongst the patrons. Does all this make us part of the establishment? We do enough so we don't fear getting shut down at any moment by the fire department, liquor board or local police but we also don't take their rule books as gospel. In such a small city, we do not have the luxury of being as underground as Videofag, for example, where you can be mainstream in certain circles yet remain under the radar in a very big city. We don't wish to suggest that Videofag and spaces like it in larger centres don't face challenges of their own, but as stated previously: we are THE counterculture: all eyes are on us, whether they be friendly or not.

Comparing the Lethbridge queer culture of 2012 to the state of affairs within Lethbridge in 2016 can be shocking, inspiring and heartening for even the bitterest of old queens. Theatre Outre's year-round venue, Club Didi, which is located smack in the middle of downtown

Lethbridge offers weekly club nights, week-long runs of queer theatre, improv nights, music tributes, and poetry jams. The rentable space also serves as a meeting and practice room for a local rope fetish club. The queer social culture is thriving in a very public way where the location encourages openness and inclusion of all. Patrons of Club Didi regularly hang out on the downtown street in front of the building for cigarette breaks. Patrons venture over for a beverage at other downtown clubs during the night, hand in hand with their loved ones. The visibility of queerness permeates downtown now. Club Didi hosts drag cabarets regularly and the number of drag queens that have been birthed in just over four years is astounding (and in no small part credited to the overpowering fame of *Rupaul's Drag Race*). Drag queens perform at the club but also venture to fine dining lounges, dance clubs aimed at a straight demographic, and late-night pizza shops. The past two years have seen The Lethbridge Casino hire Lethbridge Pride to organize a drag show for their venue. The local HIV-outreach organization, ARCHES, has produced an annual sold-out Condom Couture fashion show in a city where the radio station refuses to say the word 'condom' to promote the event. The visibility of transgendered people in the community and the downtown core has also been raised as, for example, a local funky fashion retail store, Drunken Sailor, hires and promotes staff who are transitioning, the fine-dining lounge, Plum, regularly hires a trans DJ etc. The queerness of Lethbridge is not in the shadows anymore, but is part of its everyday downtown life. Lethbridge Pride now has a Pride parade and in 2015 the parade had its first ever float - which was reserved for Theatre Outre and Club Didi to ride. That momentous occasion served as a reminder that to be vocal and stand out as a community, especially in a city like Lethbridge is a truly revolutionary act, since this Pride parade is not a tourist attraction, but one that disrupted unknowing drivers in the downtown core

and forced traffic to stop and be confronted with the visibility of a strong community of queer people who will not be denied their existence. Of course as a theatre company we cannot take full credit for all of the changes within the past four years but the space and the work that happens in the space has served, and continues to serve, as a catalyst for the visibility of the local queer community. As Brendan Healy, the former artistic director of Buddies in Bad Times puts it: Theatre Outre and Club Didi are "a beacon of queer expression and freedom in the most unexpected of places - a truly creative, risk-taking, boundary pushing theatre company that is MAKING community happen. an inspiration."