

Queering the Island
q2q Vancouver
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For 37 years, Toronto has had *Rhubarb*. For 7 not-so-straight years, Halifax has had *Queer Acts*. Saint John had a queer theatre festival. Lethbridge, Alberta has *Pretty, Witty & Gay*. Victoria has seen queer theatre at the Fringe Festival, in presentations at the Belfry Theatre and Intrepid Theatre has presented queer-focused work in its festivals and presenting series. But in 2015, there existed no company or festival that presented exclusively queer theatre.

There are queers in Victoria and on Vancouver Island. Certainly. There is a large Pride Festival, and a healthy drag scene. Intrepid Theatre had presented a few gay-themed cabarets and presentations, and we saw that there was an audience who was eager for this work, and would support this programming – often showing up in groups to the theatre.

There was an audience for queer-focused theatre, but there was no professional theatre company presenting ongoing queer work. As a queer artist, I had directed a “gay play” and had an idea for self-produced mini-festival of queer work, programmed around Pride that would give me the opportunity to direct another show and expand the queer repertoire on the island. Intrepid Theatre’s Artistic Director Janet Munsil approached me about my idea of self-producing a mini-queer theatre festival, because she felt that this was something that Victoria audiences

wanted, and that Intrepid Theatre was eager to support and produce – presenting the new and now of contemporary queer theatre, and giving me an artistic voice, a curatorial role in producing this new festival.

Meet OUTstages.

Intrepid Theatre's inaugural OUTstages Festival took place July 5-12, 2015 and featured four main stage touring productions, a multidisciplinary cabaret of work from local and festival artists, a play-reading double-bill from Victoria and Vancouver playwrights, and the family-friendly and interactive Pride Playground. In total there were nine performances and events over the week-long festival.

OUTstages was a week long festival of queer-focused work from daring interdisciplinary artists, which introduced a new festival to the emerging network of queer arts events, and provided an opportunity for audiences in Victoria to be exposed to innovative and professional queer arts programming.

As the first dedicated queer theatre festival on Vancouver Island, OUTstages presented a week long festival of edgy, contemporary, interdisciplinary work from queer artists and companies from Toronto, Halifax, New York, Victoria and Vancouver. This curated festival (by invitation and open application process) presented existing touring work from AnimalParts (*A Quiet Sip of Coffee* has played

Toronto's Summerworks, Montreal's Wildside and Ottawa's Undercurrents), was the first touring opportunity presented to Catherine Hernandez's *The Femme Playlist*, and was the first touring destination for an in-development production of Stewart Legere's *Let's Not Beat Each Other to Death*.

OUTstages is a juried festival of queer performance – and a dedicated theatre festival. The shows were selected by an open application process and by direct invitation. It was important to us to program a diverse festival – in voices, artists and theatrical styles – a challenge with only 4 main stage productions. We also wanted to support local artists and foster more queer focused work from emerging artists in BC, so we included the OUT Cabaret and play reading in the festival programming.

As a whole, Intrepid Theatre endeavors to showcase cutting-edge, innovative, and interdisciplinary theatre in our festivals and presentation series and have a track record for spotting and programming great artists and shows before they become the next big thing. The OUTstages line-up presented an eclectic mix of theatrical styles from some of the country's most exciting queer artists, from docu-theatre to rap-horror to electro-pop dance parties, and dealt with some hard hitting topics – gay bashing, homophobia and gay conversion therapy.

The 2015 festival included *A Quiet Sip of Coffee* and *Revenge of the Popinjay* from Anthony Johnston's and Nathan Schwartz's AnimalParts (New York). *A Quiet Sip of Coffee* chronicles the two weeks that the "gay-straight best-friend duo" spent at a gay conversion camp in rural BC in the summer of 2004. Years later, still struggling to come to terms with the events of that summer – and finding it impossible to agree on what exactly transpired – the two friends reunite on stage to tell their conflicting stories. This show is rambunctious, brave and over-the-top. It has played at Toronto's Summerworks, Montreal's Wildside Festival and Ottawa's Undercurrents, and this marked its BC debut. *Revenge of the Popinjay* is a dark, wild and brilliant exploration of homophobia, violence, underground rap culture and loss. In a tour-de-force performance, Johnston blends storytelling, stand-up, physical theatre and live rap music into a one-of-a-kind theatrical event.

The Femme Playlist (Toronto) came to OUTstages straight from Buddies in Bad Times in Toronto, the largest queer theatre company in North America. Set to the music of her life, writer/performer Catherine Hernandez uncovers the realities of living as a queer woman of colour.

Let's Not Beat Each Other to Death (Halifax) is an exploration of brutality and compassion; it is part monologue, part concert, part vigil, part electro-pop dance party. Inspired in part by the brutal killing of a Halifax queer activist and an attack against an outspoken gay musician, this in-development work went on to play

Summerworks in Toronto in August 2015 Vancouver's PuSh Festival in January 2016 and Montreal's FTA in May 2016.

The festival kicked off with a play reading double bill of work from two BC playwrights. We presented *The Bad Touch*, a one-act play written by UVic writing student Kat Taddei and performed by a cast of four UVic theatre students, and excerpts from *My Funny Valentine*, written by Vancouver's Dave Deveau. This free event was at capacity in the Intrepid Theatre Club. The festival closed with a multidisciplinary cabaret at The Metro Studio. The OUT Cabaret featured local and festival performers in bold, quirky, avant-garde and kitschy cabaret performances. This provided the opportunity for local artists to be a part of the festival, to try out new work, and to perform alongside their national peers. The cabaret programming included dance, spoken word, music, storytelling and a live rap performance from Popinjay (a character from *Revenge of the Popinjay*).

An important part of this festival is the opportunity for networking, for the artists to see each other's shows, and even be a part of the closing night cabaret together. Many of the artists were here for the duration of the festival, so were able to network with each other, Intrepid staff, visiting presenters and other artists. This festival provided opportunity for conversation, the exchange of ideas, and first-time meetings between local artists and touring artists, and with potential presenters. It is important to present this work and encourage this exchange of ideas outside of the Toronto-Montreal mainframe, which is exactly what OUTstages is striving to do.

OUTstages filled a void in the professional theatre offerings in the summer and provided the first queer-focused theatre event in Victoria. We had a healthy audience turnout, meeting our ticket goals and welcoming new audiences into the theatre because of the nature of the programming. We brought high caliber, alternative, contemporary queer-focused work to Victoria, creating a buzz amongst the Victoria theatre and queer communities, and in the greater community of queer artists across Canada.

This is an important addition to the arts scene in Victoria and the queer-arts scene in Canada as it benefits an underserved audience, provides a professional theatre offering to the summer theatre scene while solidifying the importance of diversity and LGBTQ focused programs in the City of Victoria, and provides another festival destination for tour-ready work from the rest of the country. It is important to have a festival of queer theatre and performance in Western Canada to engage in dialogue, to showcase new works, to inspire conversation, to support touring artists and to give local artists the opportunity to see the work of their national peers and to foster meetings and networking amongst artists and presenters. Here is a quote from Dave Deveau, who might have said it best:

“In a country so enormous in size, it's incredible to remember how small it is in community and OUTstages gathered the very best in the Canadian queer theatre community for a week of celebration and idea exchange on the West Coast. So very important to have a gathering like this outside of the Toronto-Montreal mainframe and see the vibrancy of the local ecology. This festival fills a vacancy that Western Canada has been hungering to fill. “

-Dave Deveau
Playwright, My Funny Valentine

As I finish this, we are just days away from opening the second OUTstages Festival. The hunger is still there, and we have another week of daring queer performance filled with personal stories. I am now a second-time curator and the festival is carving out its place in the queer theatre landscape in Canada, with more festival applications this year, presenters planning to attend and hopefully, local artists are inspired to start creating their own queer work right here on the island. Here is Vancouver Island, and here is queer(er).