

## Nightswimming • Pure Research • Final Report

# Racialized Community Actors Over the Age of 55

*This Nightswimming Pure Research project was conducted at Tarragon Theatre's ExtraSpace from January 26th - 28th, 2024. Research conducted by Zahida Rahemtulla, Brian Quirt, Gloria Mok and Miriam Fernandes.*

*Thank you to the Tarragon for its partnership and collaboration on Pure Research.*

*This report was published October 2024.*

*For more information on Pure Research, please visit [nightswimming.ca/research](https://nightswimming.ca/research).*

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## Introduction

This research inquiry came out of my experiences facing challenges when casting racialized theatre actors over the age of 55.

As more racialized content is programmed on Canadian stages, there can be shortages of this demographic. Artists and companies struggle to find actors in order to program shows, or in other instances, individuals without a background in acting, who are younger, or from other ethnicities are cast.

As a playwright who has written a couple of shows with racialized, older characters, this situation started to become familiar. My first play, *The Wrong Bashir*, is an intergenerational comedy that includes a cast of nine South Asian actors, 7 of whom are meant to be over 55. I had similar experiences with my second play, *The Frontliners*, after our team lost the lead actor. We were unable to find a cast member to replace them, despite opening our pool to professional actors from other cities and widening the age requirement. As a result, we postponed the show.

I know this predicament is familiar to many of my fellow artists across Canadian theatre. Looking at recent seasons in Toronto and Vancouver, for example, from 2022-2024 alone, many companies programmed racialized plays, but struggled to cast them with the precise ethnicities called for. Outside of Canadian urban centers where racialized demographics are lower, this situation is exacerbated, affecting the ability of companies to program diverse shows.

Often, teams are faced with solving casting shortages on the fly: quickly coming up with short-term, bandage solutions. For example, raising money to bring a professional racialized actor from out of town or casting a younger person to play older, rather than building capacity to help solve the problem in a more long-term manner.

Over the last six years, when we couldn't find professional racialized actors for the shows I wrote, I began suggesting community actors to the theatre companies I was working with. Usually, these individuals were people I had seen in talent shows or community productions. However, as I observed the process of bringing community actors into professional rehearsal spaces, I noticed this solution came with its own challenges. I saw that rehearsal spaces with mixed casts often required specific supports for both the theatre companies engaging community actors and the community actors participating.

## **Research Background**

These experiences motivated me to think about this problem and possible solutions. Since 2021, I have been a student at OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) in Adult Education, where my research looks at bringing community actors into professional theatre spaces.

Specifically, I have looked at what paradigms and approaches could support community actors and the professional theatre companies working with them to achieve success. I also looked at the problem theoretically, including investigating the historical factors that have led to the current shortages of racialized actors.

Interviewing actors and members of the industry through my thesis research showed how cycles of inequity and systemic barriers built over many decades have often impeded the ability of racialized groups (especially from older generations) in joining the professional industry.

Many older actors left the industry in previous decades, and persons with racialized identities who worked in other fields but may have harbored an interest in acting spoke about how they never thought of being artists or actors. They didn't imagine that the industry could have been a place for them to have a career, often due to lack of representation.

Despite a strong focus on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Canadian theatre in recent times, the intergenerational effects of these previous inequalities has created a cycle of limited skills, reinforcing the need for targeted efforts to address capacity and skills development. This is particularly true of older demographics, who may not know about (or know how to access) the growing initiatives related to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in recent times and the opportunities now seeking them.

Although focused on racialized groups, the findings and experiments examined may also apply to other marginalized groups who have historically been limited in their ability to build capacity.

## **Experiments with Nightswimming's Pure Research Project**

The time and resources provided by Pure Research helped to not only think through this problem in terms of building capacity long-term, but also allowed us to experiment with practical solutions and collective, industry problem solving.

Our experiment was split into two parts:

**Experiment 1** – We held a **Focus Group** which brought together members of the theatre industry in the Greater Toronto Area who have grappled with casting racialized older actors from the producing side to speak collectively about challenges, previous solutions, and new solutions. *See pages 4 to 12 below.*

**Experiment 2** – We held a **Community Actor Weekend Intensive** where we invited community members over 55 with limited or community acting experience to join a session at Tarragon Theatre, where they could participate in a pilot training workshop. Throughout the weekend, we explored questions they had about joining professional theatre spaces and what barriers they experienced in participating in the industry. One of the goals of the weekend intensive was to help us understand what meaningful training models for community actors could look like. *See pages 13 to 23.*

Both experiments were designed to imagine new strategies that could move beyond short-term solutions and avoid “casting in crisis” when teams must urgently replace or cast quickly.

**Conclusions** can be found on *page 24*.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Nightswimming for supporting this project and, more widely, for providing space for theatre artists to explore and cultivate questions we don't normally have time to ask. Brian Quirt and Gloria Mok lent their dramaturgical insight from the initial phases of the project to thinking through and conducting the physical experiments. We were also very fortunate to have collaborated with Miriam Fernandes, who led the community-actor weekend intensive and lent her directorial eye and community bent to the project. I am grateful to them all.

## Experiment 1 – Focus Group with Members of the Industry

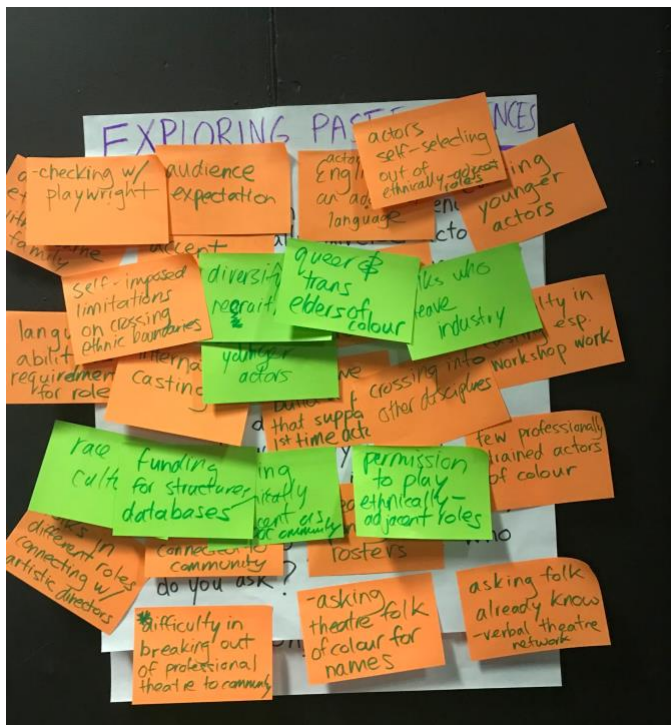
### The Focus Group and Participants:

The Focus Group was held at Tarragon Theatre's Extraspace on January 26th, 2024 for 3 hours. In addition to the researchers (Brian, Gloria, Zahida, and Miriam), the focus group was made up of 8 individuals from across the theatre sector in Greater Toronto, who had some experience with the question at hand, often as producers, but also as playwrights seeking actors for their plays or members of a cast that included older racialized actors. The attendees were from many different backgrounds, including Black, South Asian, White, Asian, and immigrant backgrounds. A number of the participants were Artistic Directors, one was a manager of a theatre education program, and one was running a theatre group for more than 10 years with community actors in a Toronto suburb.

### The Focus Group Questions:

Following an icebreaker and improv game, we shifted our focus to the following questions:

- ❖ What has been your experience casting racialized actors? (Of any age? Specifically within the over 55 age demographic? Hard to cast roles more generally?)
- ❖ What do you currently do and where do you currently search when you are trying to cast racialized actors over 55? Where do you post? How do you connect to actors? Who do you ask?



Group Brainstorming Poster: Previous Experiences Casting Racialized Actors.

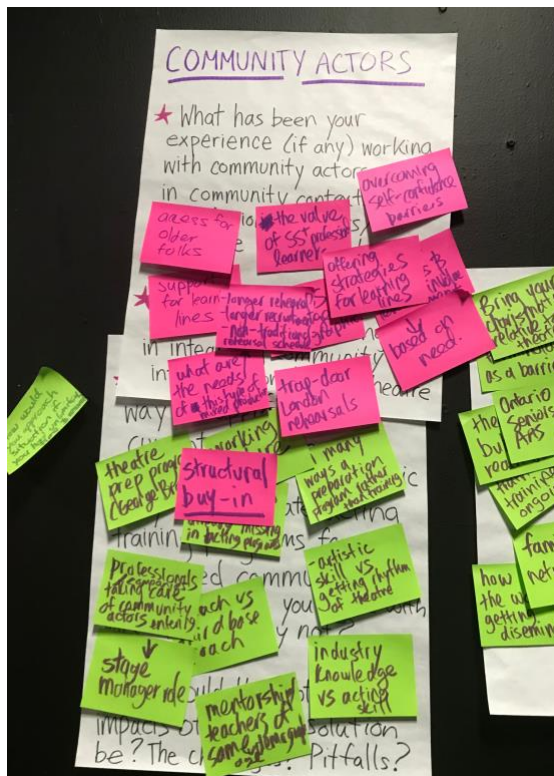
We then brainstormed challenges and the solutions artists are currently employing:

- ❖ What (if any) have been some of the challenges casting in this demographic?
- ❖ What have been your solutions (or solutions you have seen employed by others)?

### **Future Solutions and Future Training:**

In the latter part of the focus group, we shifted our focus to brainstorming new solutions. We discussed creating training programs for older racialized community actors. Participants also considered how theatre companies might feasibly implement such training models:

- ❖ How would you approach casting challenges if you had unlimited time and resources? What kinds of things would you like to see happen?
- ❖ What has been your experience (if any) working with community actors? In community contexts? In professional contexts/alongside professional actors?
- ❖ What were the dynamics, successes, and challenges in including community actors into professional settings?
- ❖ Some say that one way to help the current situation for casting in this demographic may be to create acting training programs for racialized community actors over the age of 55. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
- ❖ What would the potential impacts of such a solution be? The challenges? Pitfalls?



Group Brainstorming Poster: Working with Community Actors.

## The Focus Group Results:

In the following sections, I relay a summarized version of the Focus Group results grouped by theme.

### **Trends in Industry Related to Casting Older Racialized Actors:**

1. **Focus on Identity:** Younger playwrights are increasingly writing pieces that call for actors with older racialized backgrounds (often in parent and grandparent roles).
2. **Language Requirements:** There is also a growing demand for actors who can speak multiple languages.
3. **Support for Emerging Artists:** Support for emerging artists is often tied to younger age demographics, which can overlook individuals from older demographics who are still new to theatre or returning to theatre after pursuing other careers, and may also benefit from support.

### **Impacts Related to Not Being Able to Cast Older Racialized Actors:**

1. **Loss of Authenticity:**
  - Casting younger actors for older roles results in less authentic portrayals on stage, which can greatly change the overall feeling of theatrical works.
  - The physical presence, mannerisms, and bodies of elderly people, which are rarely seen on stage, can communicate an age and wisdom which can be integral to meaning.
  - This leads to questions around whether we should forego certain stories altogether if authentic casting is not possible?
2. **Programming Challenges:**
  - The shortage of older racialized actors raises serious questions about the feasibility of certain productions, and may limit the ability of companies to take certain works on.
  - Some artists have been able to turn to non-actors, such as community elders, to fill roles, drawing on the natural storytelling abilities of these elders.
3. **Representation Gaps, an Industry-Wide Issue:**
  - The lack of older actors limits the portrayal of aging and unique life experiences, so that the theatre sector may be missing a significant aspect of the human experience on our stages.
  - There are widespread difficulties in bringing older voices and bodies to the stage, signaling a broader access challenge across the sector.

### **Current Challenges in Casting Older Racialized Actors:**

1. **Limited Availability:** There is a high demand for the limited number of professional older racialized actors, often resulting in last-minute casting crises.
2. **Higher-Paying Roles:** Older professional actors may prioritize higher-paying film and TV roles over theatre gigs, or may have scheduling conflicts from the other theatre gigs also seeking them.

3. **Language and Accent Barriers:** Some older community actors may not have the necessary English skills or accents required for roles.

### **Current Solutions in Casting Older Racialized Actors:**

1. **Ethnically Adjacent Casting:** Asking actors from similar ethnic backgrounds to play the role.
2. **Casting Younger Actors:** Younger actors portraying (often much) older characters.
3. **The Rolodex:** Artistic Directors maintain relationships with racialized actors they are used to working with and seek recommendations from them.
4. **Non-Actors:** Casting non-professionals for authenticity in productions where this is possible.
5. **Relying on Networks and Companies/Racialized Artists:** Asking racially specific companies or racialized artists for actor recommendations.
6. **Agents:** Agents are diversifying their rosters to include more racialized actors to reflect growing need.
7. **Community Outreach:** Some companies have built capacity for certain projects and invest in engaging with local communities.

### **Challenges in Connecting to Community Actors and Cultural Communities:**

1. **Finding and Engaging Semi-Professional Actors:**
  - Difficulty in reaching semi-professional or hobby actors due to lack of established outreach channels in theatres. Hobby actors may be well-suited to youth showcases, public readings, and smaller professional roles.
2. **Awareness of Opportunities:**
  - Communities outside professional theatre (community actors, semi-professional actors, and older actors who left the industry) are often unaware of available opportunities seeking them.
3. **Communication Barriers:**
  - Theatre administrators unable to reach individuals outside established networks and established methods of recruitment, communication infrastructures that go beyond usual approaches are lacking.
4. **Insular Casting Practices:**
  - Directors rely on familiar actors or “darlings” of companies. These patterns complicate efforts to diversify, know about, and include new actors.
5. **Cyclical Casting:**
  - Tendency to repeatedly cast the same actors, limiting opportunities for new introductions.

## Sensitivity Barriers in Casting Racialized Actors:

1. **Hesitancy to Play Roles Outside One's Identity:**
  - Racialized actors sometimes limit themselves from taking roles that are the same race but from ethnicities or nationalities that don't exactly match their own due to fear of backlash or authenticity concerns.
  - Worries about insensitivity or taking away opportunities from their fellow actors is also a concern. This can limit opportunities for racialized actors and the number of racialized actors further.
2. **Cultural Understanding:**
  - The complexity of casting involves not just race but also cultural understanding (i.e.: *"There's definitely shared culture amongst people of different races, and vice versa. If I'm workshopping a piece that is set, say, in Jamaica where the culture is the focus, but the color of the people is not the focus, there's going to be way more cultural understanding and cross pollination between a Black Jamaican and a Chinese Jamaican than between a Black Jamaican and a Black Ethiopian, right? And so we have to ask what is of primary importance as well?"*)
3. **Impact on Marginalized Groups:**
  - Divisions within racialized groups around matters such as this can weaken collective power amongst racialized groups in the industry.

## New Solutions and Approaches:

1. **Designing the Process Around Actor Needs:**
  - Accommodating actors with no stage experience is possible through the creation of supportive work environments.
2. **Reconnecting with Old Actors:**
  - Engaging actors who left the industry or have experience from other countries but lack access in Canada through re-connecting them into the "email chain" and rolodex.
3. **Exploring Other Performing Arts Disciplines:**
  - Looking for older actors in fields like dance, where individuals have stage presence and production experience (i.e.: *"In South Asian culture, it's not divided right? In the Natyashastra. It's a combination of music, dance and theatre. The disciplines are all combined."*)

## Increasing Outreach Ideas:

1. **Senior Organizations:**
  - Senior nonprofits, groups, temples, and churches.
2. **Social Service Agencies:**
  - Connecting through government agencies that list senior programs and work with many different senior ethnic groups.
3. **Newcomer Programs:**



- Outreach programs to immigrant and refugee communities, many of which include elders.
- 4. **Databases for Racialized Artists:**
  - Databases like CultureBrew.art.
  - Address challenges in maintaining free-of-cost databases.
- 5. **Personal Recommendations:**
  - Continue to rely on trusted racialized artist community leaders for reliable referrals, but encouraging Artistic Directors and producers to make their own inroads to communities in their own city.

## **New Ideas for Initiatives:**

1. **Encourage Artists to Bring Relatives to the Theatre:**
  - Artists introduce interested family members to theatre (i.e.: *"I feel like the theatre community is the most valuable resource, because we all have friends and family that we can say, 'hey, auntie, you love to do skits!' I definitely know that I have a relative or two that would be nervous, but would be very interested in acting."*  
*"That would be awesome. Can you imagine a group of us coming to a program, with an interested relative? And they hear all about how to get into theatre, and then they're just coming on their own? We should start a group!"*
2. **Integrate Acting and Writing Programs:**
  - Highlight older life experiences and stories through combined programs (i.e.: *"The stories that older people have...they've lived a life man, and whether they're telling a personal story or telling a fictional story, there's just so much to them. But so many of their stories are not prioritized because everything is so youth-focused. We want to hear what the 21 year olds have to say! Okay, great but they've lived like a third as long as these people over here. So it would be really cool if we do some writing in tandem with an Acting Program. We should all talk. How do you get to a point maybe where, you know, a playwright that's been trained through us is now putting on a show with actors that have been trained by you? None of whom thought that they were going to ever be able to do it, because they thought their ship had sailed. You know, changing the definition of emerging artists, not just finding the young people, but people that have stories and a wealth of emotions to draw upon. Both playwrights and actors. I think that's really key."*
3. **Redefine "Emerging Artists":**
  - Widen age criteria for emerging artist programs.

## **Existing Models and Organization Structures to Draw Upon:**

Several existing models provide approaches and ideas for welcoming older individuals into the arts. These include:

- **Youth Elders Project by Buddies in Bad Times Theatre:** This initiative pairs queer youth with older queer individuals to share life experiences and create intergenerational collaborative pieces.
- **Canadian Senior Artist Resource Network (CSR):** CSR provides mentorship for senior artists and offers flexible participation options, such as splitting roles and fees between two older artists to accommodate older artists' needs (they each play half the run).
- **Toronto Arts Council Refugee Artist Mentorship Program:** Includes older artists amongst refugees, offering a model for a network and support system to help integrate new artists into the theatre community.
- **Funding from the Department of Senior Affairs in Ontario:** Supports projects that engage seniors, allowing theatre companies to think beyond traditional sources of arts funding when engaging this demographic.

## Brainstorming Supports for Community Actors

Ideas for integrating community actors into professional theatre spaces included:

- **Training Structures for Crisis Moments and Building Longer-Term Community:** Developing rapid training programs for crisis recasting (when a community actor may need quick support to join a cast/rehearsal process right away) and longer-term training programs that ease individuals into the industry through informal events and play readings.
- **Structural Support in Rehearsal Spaces:** Assigning personnel to be present in rehearsal rooms to address community actor needs and questions, to lift pressure from directors, stage managers, and others.
- **Expanding Outreach:** Engaging diverse communities beyond city centers, such as Mississauga and Brampton, through workshops and events (i.e.: *“As opposed to inviting everybody to the Tarragon, go to Mississauga! Go to Brampton, go to Scarborough, and, like, hold workshops in those communities at a library!”*)

## Supporting Community Actors (Industry Perspective):

- **Focusing on Practical and Soft Skills:** Emphasizing the importance of understanding industry norms, timeliness, and professional expectations over artistic abilities. (i.e.: *“When I think of integrating community actors into professional spaces, I really don't think of artistic skill as the first thing. For me, where I notice the difference is, like, understanding the norms of the theatre, the rhythms, the speed at which things need to happen, and sometimes, the requirements of preparation, or, timeliness, things like that, because there's a lot more flexibility in community theatre. I think these are the things where it starts to feel like someone isn't a professional in the room. And so I think a training program could almost focus more on just making people ready to enter that professional space and not be surprised by what all the different steps in the process are. And understand, if you block something on Monday and then you run it on Thursday, you should still know it, which is not immediately clear, cultural knowledge,”*

- **Demystifying Working Culture:** Offering clear explanations of theatre hours, Actors Equity, and compensation to build confidence and knowledge among new actors.
- **Support for Memorizing Lines:** Recognizing that older actors, both professional and community, often struggle most with memorizing lines and being ready to provide a lot of support in this area.

### Structures to Help Support Community Actor Ideas (Industry Perspective)

- **Liaison Role:** Assigning a dedicated liaison, similar to a "third base coach," to offer in-rehearsal professional guidance to new actors.
- **Lower Commitment Tester Programs:** Implementing preparatory programs that give prospective actors a taste of the industry before committing to full training (George Brown has a model of this in its current acting program).
- **Stage Manager Training:** Increasing support and training for stage managers to work with community actors and be aware of what some of their gaps may be.

### Helpful Approach Ideas (Industry Perspective):

- **Adapting Theatrical Language:** Adapting theatrical jargon to make it more accessible to non-actors.
- **Shared Responsibility:** Ensuring care of community actors and helping them adjust to theatrical cultural norms is shared by all team members and co-actors are on board.
- **Age-Appropriate Trainers:** Having facilitators of a similar age to older participants to foster relatability, effective training, and a deeper understanding and empathy for challenges specific to actors from older age demographics.

### Other:

Incorporating community actors can also:

- **Fulfill Artistic Dreams:** Provide an opportunity for people to pursue long-held artistic dreams that they couldn't realize or didn't have a chance to think about or imagine earlier in life.
- **Enhance Representation:** Increase representation in the theatre industry.
- **Leverage Retired Individuals:** Utilize the flexibility and availability of retired individuals who may have the time and resources to commit to full-time theatre production schedules.


The above sections summarize findings from the Focus Group. In the next section, I will introduce and discuss the process, findings, and discussions that surfaced during the second part of this Pure Research project, the **Community Actor Weekend Intensive**, which sometimes reflect the subjects mentioned above from a community actor perspective.

## Experiment 2 – Community Actor Weekend Intensive


### Overview

The second part of the Nightswimming Pure Research project involved a Community Actor Weekend Intensive. This initiative brought together three racialized actors over 55 with limited professional experience for a 2-day training at Tarragon Theatre. Knowing we only could support 3 spots, outreach was conducted to a few cultural and community organizations in Greater Toronto to invite participants to apply.

### Marketing and Outreach



## TWO-DAY PAID ACTING TRAINING




As part of Pure Research 2024, a project of [Nightswimming Theatre](#), we are seeking individuals with an interest in acting over the age of 55 to participate in a 2-day training at [Tarragon Theatre](#) in January 2024.

The purpose of this project is to expand the number of professionally trained, racially diverse, older actors that can be cast in projects.

If you are interested, please scan the QR code or email:

communityactors.pr@gmail.com



## SEEKING RACIALLY DIVERSE, AGE 55+ COMMUNITY ACTORS

Do you have an interest in acting but **limited/no professional experience**? Come **work in-studio** with a director and be part of creating **new research** in theatre focused on **designing professional acting training programs** for senior actors of colour this January 2024.

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### ELIGIBILITY

- Self-identity as racialised
- Are over the age of 55
- Are interested in theatre acting (and perhaps have acted in community)
- Live in Toronto / the GTA
- Are available Sat, January 27th and Sun, January 28th, 2024

You will be paid for your participation at \$125/day, for two days.

### INTERESTED?

Please fill out this [google form](#) or email us! [communityactors.pr@gmail.com](mailto:communityactors.pr@gmail.com)

Applications accepted on a rolling basis until  
November 25th, 2023.

Pure Research is a program of [Nightswimming Theatre](#), to be conducted at Toronto's [Tarragon Theatre](#)

Posters for the intensive were circulated for a few weeks in November 2023 to get the word out.

### The Applicants

We were very happy to receive 20 applications for the weekend intensive, and realized that narrowing down the cohort to 3 would be very difficult. Applicants were between 55 and 74 years old, with a significant representation from Black, South Asian and East Asian community members. Their experience levels varied from no formal training to decades of community theatre and acting class experience.

In terms of their interest in joining theatre at an older age, many mentioned being driven by a desire to explore new opportunities in their retirement, finally pursue a lifelong interest in acting, or rekindle a past hobby.

Common barriers to starting a career earlier included lack of time, previous work commitments, lack of awareness about opportunities, and self-selecting out, since they didn't see actors from racialized backgrounds represented in theatre or thought their accent or English skills may not be suited.

Applicants learned about the program through various channels including nonprofit organizations, [Act II Studio at Toronto Metropolitan University](#), the Toronto Poetry Slam, community theatre postings, social media and Facebook, and children who were professional artists in the Greater Toronto industry.

### **One-On-One Chats**

After filling out an interest form, applicants participated in one-on-one Zoom chats, framed as informal conversations to reduce pressure. They discussed their current activities, past experiences, previous acting experience, previous professional experiences, barriers faced in theatre, and what they hoped to learn at a training session.

### **Weekend Intensive Process at Tarragon Theatre**



*Miriam Fernandes leading workshop during community actor weekend.*



*Physical warm-up during community actor weekend.*

The final cohort of three participants was chosen to balance diversity in racial backgrounds, genders, work, and other aspects of intersecting identities. The aim was to bring together a mix of skills and experience, with ideal candidates being those who were not overly experienced, but not entirely new to acting.

### **Structure of the Weekend**

The Community Actor Weekend focused on preparing participants for a rehearsal process as if they were starting on Monday (the day after the intensive was set to end).

- **Day 1:**
  - Participants shared their backgrounds and interests in theatre.
  - A **K-W-L** (What I Know, Want to Know, Learned) chart was started.
  - Energizing games like "Hep Ho" and warm-ups.
  - Miriam led text work focused on scenes from *A Doll's House* to help participants understand character intentions and pivotal events.
  - Throughout the day, questions and informal discussions about the professional theatre industry surfaced at different times, sparked by the activities we were doing.

- **Day 2:**
  - Continued scene work from *A Doll's House* exploring different physical choices and blocking techniques.
  - Discussions about the theatre industry, covering more detailed processes such as casting and auditions to technical direction and what the Actors Equity Association is.
  - A final check-out session with reflection on learning and completion of the **K-W-L** chart, including what community actors might wish to learn if future acting training programs were available to them.

## Community Actor Weekend Findings

In the next section, I present some of the ideas and questions that surfaced throughout the weekend through the frame of the K-W-L chart. I have sometimes included quotes for more context.

We began by asking what participants already knew about theatre and also about where their knowledge comes from. This led to conversations about the differences between community and professional theatre, where actors currently find roles, and self-taught strategies.

### What we KNOW:

<p><b>Community theatre is more flexible than professional theatre. Community theatre often relies on favours and asking for volunteer time.</b></p>	<p><i>People are already doing like eight, nine hour a day jobs. And on top of that, they keep running the theatre. And you need to call people up. Are you available? Because we are not paying so much. The organizers are not getting paid and are putting in every day, three, four hours everyday. It's like social work!</i></p>
<p><b>Scheduling in community theatre is based upon availability. Community theatre is often unpaid.</b></p>	<p><i>Because we are not paying, we can't fix the dates. We have to ask everybody about their availabilities, then at least two days in a week we keep it where all the cast should be present. The other two or three days, we can work on specific scenes, different scenes, or one to one.</i></p>
<p><b>How to find roles in community theatre.</b></p>	<p><i>Social media, Instagram, Facebook, email bank.</i></p> <p><i>Nowadays, lots of places have pages. I check Obsidian's page on Instagram. They put stuff there for auditions. I get the newsletters, and so I kind of just see what's happening and keep an eye out.</i></p>

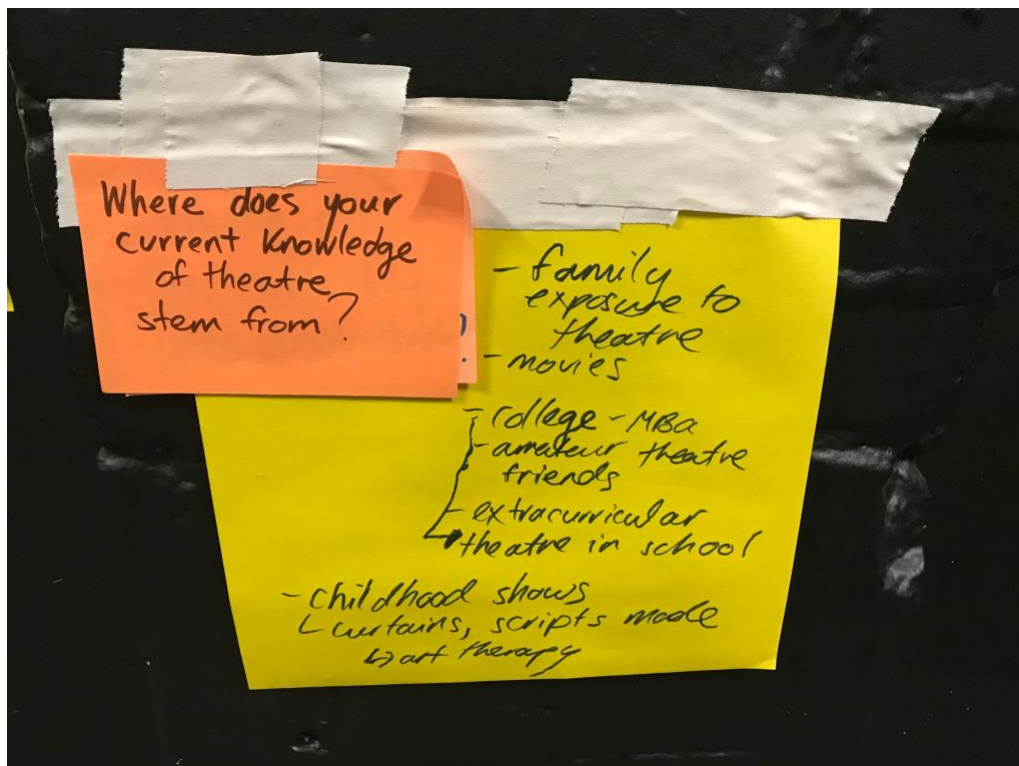


**Strategies for memorizing lines.**

*I recite them to myself as I drive the bus.*

*Memorizing lines is really hard for me. But a trick, or something that just kind of happened, was like in the choir, we had these songs, but they had done videos sometimes during rehearsal, and when I played that back, it was easier to watch a video, and then when you're playing it back, something registers a lot easier with the movement and your lines and stuff.*

The reflection on what community actors already knew, as well as the self-taught strategies demonstrate a resourcefulness and adaptability that is often required in community theatre.



Introductory exercise: "Where does your knowledge of theatre come from?"

We also discussed where participants knowledge of theatre came from:

- The movies
- My son who is a professional actor.
- Back home:

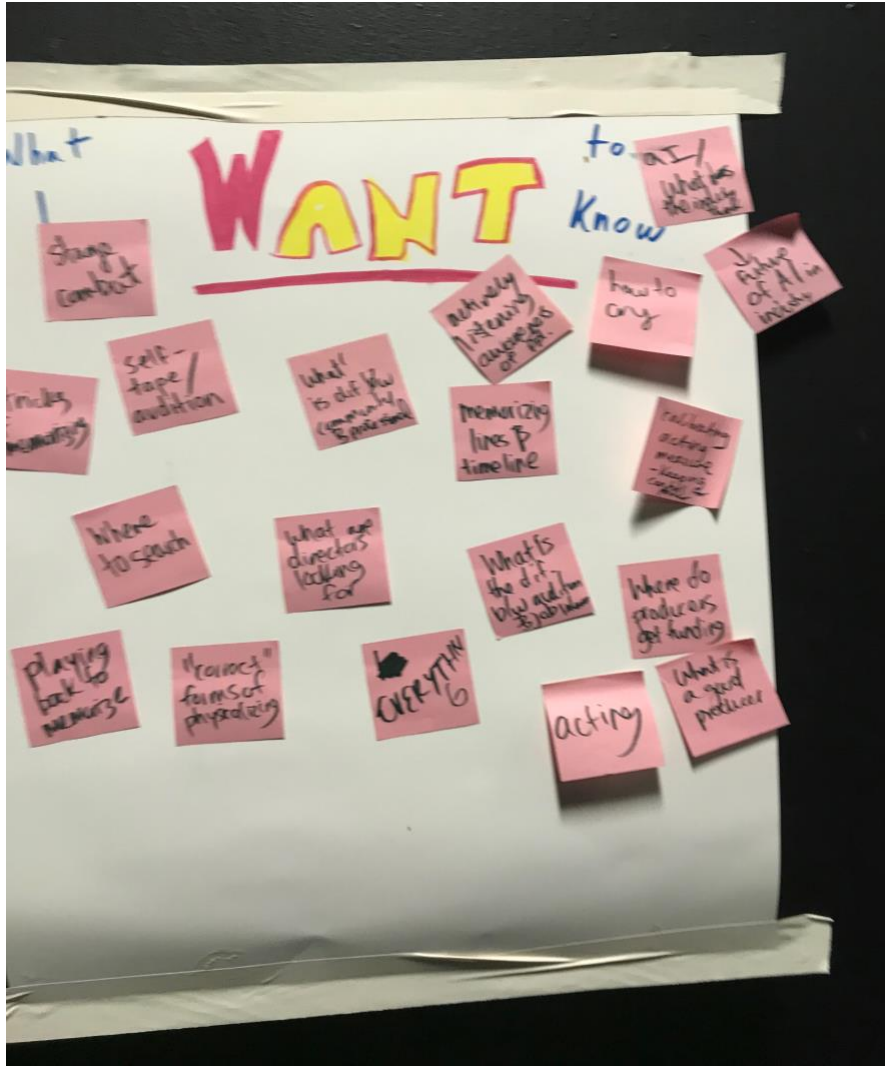
*I started from my college. There is lots of theatre in Amritsar Punjab. I got a chance to go to the National School of Drama. But then I said, "Oh, my parents have spent a lot of money on*



my MBA, so I should not do more.” But I still had theatre friends. I learned a lot from them. I kept it as a hobby.

- From childhood. Putting on plays for my family.

**What do you WANT TO KNOW about Acting Professionally?:**



“What I Want to Know” Chart.

Our conversations throughout the weekend often focused upon what community actors would **Want to Know** about professional theatre, as well as where they felt their current gaps were:

<p><b>How to deliver material.</b></p>	<p><i>I'm comfortable delivering what I wrote, but find it difficult to deliver other writer's material.</i></p> <p><i>How to calibrate and control emotions: how do actors know when to cry, how to cry enough? But not too much?</i></p>
<p><b>What you should be doing when you aren't delivering dialogue.</b></p>	<p><i>I want to learn about "busy work". What are you supposed to be doing when you are delivering dialogue? Should I be fiddling? Moving a chair? In dance it's clear how you are moving but not in theatre. Knowing the right angle, where to stand. Because when I went to Stratford, I noticed the actors stand on particular angles, but how do they know?</i></p>
<p><b>Timing.</b></p>	<p><i>How long do you give [the other actor] before responding, so the interaction is fluid?</i></p>
<p><b>Voicework.</b></p>	<p><i>Voice control and tone. Voicework, how not to sound monotonous?</i></p>
<p><b>Getting into character.</b></p>	<p><i>I'm a strong character so I will need to practice more what the character would say, rather than what I would say!</i></p>
<p><b>Not sure what I don't know.</b></p>	<p><i>I'm so new to this that I'm very open to learning anything.</i></p>
<p><b>How to audition.</b></p>	<p><i>I don't know how to do an audition. What is a self-tape?</i></p> <p><i>What's the difference between auditioning and regular, you know, job interviews?</i></p> <p><i>I also always wonder, what are directors looking for?</i></p>
<p><b>Where to find opportunities.</b></p>	<p><i>I didn't know about older actors for people of colour training, it's hard to find opportunities, and know where to look.</i></p>

<p><b>How to handle stage fright and nerves.</b></p>	<p><i>It's my weak point inside. I'm so scared. But I know that as an actor, you cannot be scared. And I always wonder about stage fright, you know, does it really happen to professional actors? And then what? For example, would the stage manager help him or her, if that happens? I always wonder what happens if there's an emergency?</i></p>
<p><b>How to cry on cue.</b></p>	<p><i>I always wonder, for acting, how come so many actors can cry whenever they want? And you know, especially for the play and for theatre, you might have to cry for like, how many, 25 shows? That's amazing. And some people tell me that they put some eye drops or something, but I'd really like to know how they do that.</i></p>
<p><b>How to speak in a Canadian accent.</b></p>	<p><i>It's one of the barriers, yeah, to be an actor here in Canada. English is not my first language. So I find, no matter how hard I try, I still got some accent.</i></p>
<p><b>How to maintain energy through the entirety of a run.</b></p>	<p><i>I was in this choir for this professional play and the show ran for seven days, and two on a Saturday! And it was like, brutal. I had no idea. And then the call times you had to be there, you know, two or three hours before. And I had no idea that all of that happened. It was a marathon, and I was not prepared for it. It took a lot out of me, and I wanted to know how people stay being committed. Just staying focused and in that space sometimes was really difficult to maintain. And a lot of people were coming from work, and they had other jobs and stuff, and, you know, so I really understood, like, how hard it was for them. So I want to know about maintaining that kind of energy to be able to be in theatre.</i></p>

<p><b>“Backstage protocol.”</b></p>	<p><i>I would like to find out more about the backstage rules or regulations. I mean, the protocol. Because I really don't know. You know, I don't want to offend anybody by saying something, you know that is not acceptable, or behave in a non-acceptable way. I know lateness is bad, for example. But for example, can I bring some food to the backstage? Things like that. I don't know what's the custom, you know. So that's a lot of worries on the back of my head, like, should I say this? For example, they say “break a leg” or something like that. Is it okay to say that to somebody who is superstitious or not? I don't know things like that, I don't know the backstage protocol.</i></p>
<p><b>How do professional actors memorize lines? Do you have to memorize word-for-word? What is the timeline for memorization?</b></p>	<p><i>With the rehearsal process, for me, memorization is the most difficult. I can't imagine how the professional actors, you know, remember all the lines within the time period. I wonder, normally, what would the director requirements be like? You know, within one week, do I have to, remember the whole play? Is it like when I was in the primary school? Everything I have to recite it? Does it have to be word for word? Or can the director, you know, allow a similar meaning, is there a fine line with that? How exact do the lines have to be?</i></p>

**General Industry:**

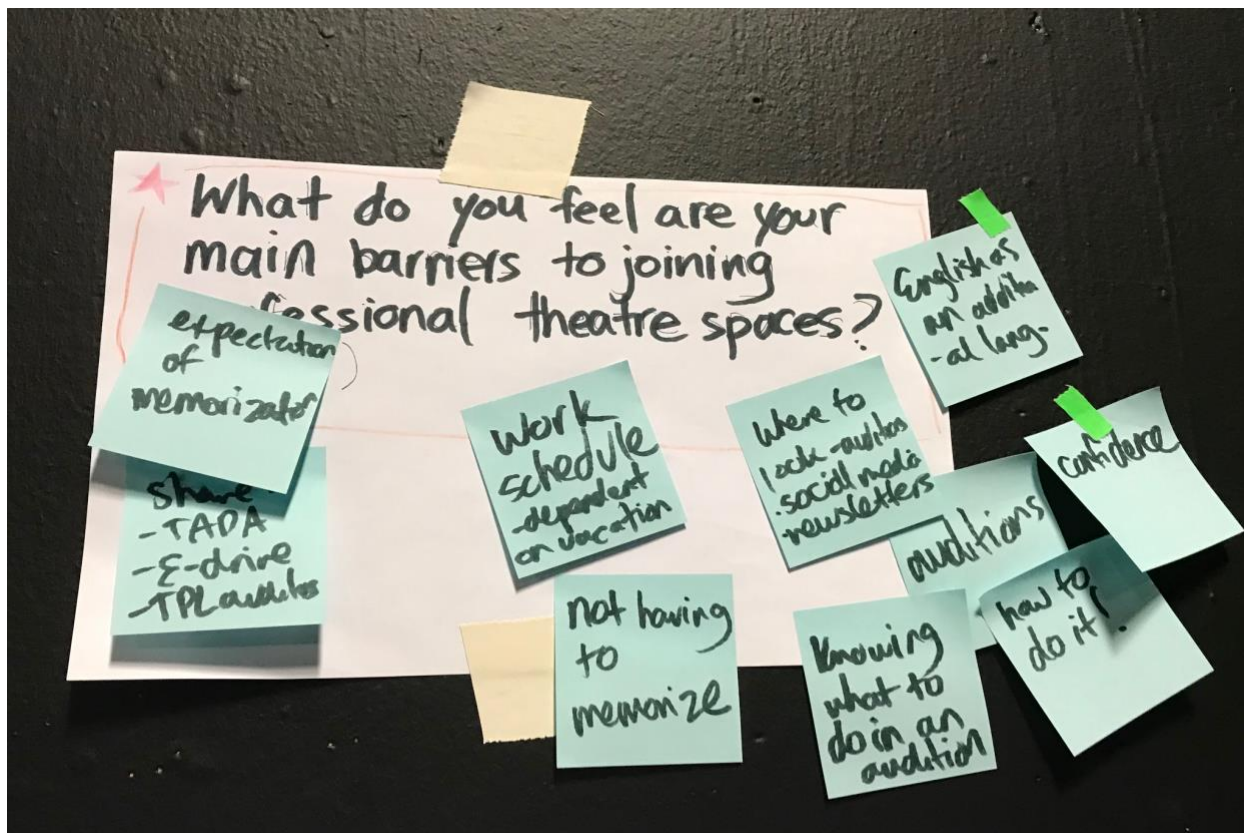
- *It may be a stupid question, but what is the difference between being an actor in community theater and professional acting?*
- *What is the set up for professional theatre? The structure? The rehearsals?*
- *What is the time commitment?*
- *What is the pay when you're working professionally?*
- *Where do theatre producers get funding?*
- *How many days a week do professional actors rehearse?*
- *Is there a centralized place to look for auditions?*
- *What is new play development and how do actors get involved?*
- *What is a tech rehearsal? What are previews?*
- *What is the schedule of a run? From the first day of rehearsal to the last day of a professional show?*

Discussions during the weekend around what actors wished to know often echoed ideas brought up in the Focus Group. For example, alongside learning the hard, technical skills of acting, (getting into character, blocking, becoming comfortable on stage, voicework, memorization, and timing), community actors also spoke about gaps they wished to fill around some of the soft skills. These included understanding the cultural and unspoken rules of professional theatre and maintaining the energy needed to complete a run. Community actors also spoke about wishing to increase their knowledge about where to find opportunities, how to audition, what directors look for, and how to navigate the industry with a non-Canadian/non-American accent, or in cases where English is not one's first language.

### **What we Learned:**

At the end of the second day, we checked in with participants about any new skills they may have acquired or learned, as well as about barriers they have experienced in entering theatre in the past.

<p><b>The gift of more time in professional theatre allows for more team building.</b></p>	<p><i>In the physical exercise, we could make a team. If we are doing the exercise together, we can have better chemistry. We are mentally prepared. We are physically prepared. It's like a real warm up before sports, playing hockey game, or karate. You need warm up, it's so important so that you won't get injured, right? The same idea.</i></p>
<p><b>What subtext is and how to dissect a script to find it.</b></p>	<p><i>I found what we did in the exercise dissecting the script to find hidden meaning helped me understand the character's motive and voice that gave it a clear understanding. I have never done that before. I usually just read it.</i></p>
<p><b>Learned about physical warm-ups, and why actors do them.</b></p>	<p><i>I like the physical warm ups that aren't necessarily done that much in community theatre. It's probably good to have like circle things where there's like interaction and expression. I think it kind of brings people together, there's more cohesiveness in people.</i></p>



Barriers brainstorming poster.

### Barriers:

- Confidence to attend English-speaking first language theatre spaces.
- Knowing where to look for opportunities.
- Knowing how to audition.
- Overcoming the intimidation of joining.
- How to start.
- Not yet retired – still work 5 days a week.
- Looking at participation in professional theatre not as a new career, but how it might expand my life, and how this fits into seeking professional roles:

*You're not necessarily really thinking, "I'm gonna be a big theatre actor when I'm like, 75!" I don't even know what's happening in the next five years, right? But I have personal goals. I like the idea of theatre. I do like to have expression. A place to express. And maybe, you know, some old thoughts or dreams that I might have had can come out. But only as long as we can contribute. I do want to contribute and be seen and express a purpose. So I would think of it more as a philosophical, open worldly thing. Maybe it's that you want to have fun, or you want to learn something new, or express yourself, bring something to community, give a gift to others. That feels rewarding. I'm not thinking, "if I study another 10 years, maybe I'll get into a Broadway play or something!" But I am thinking, "well, next year I might do this, and try this out, or maybe I'll do an audition, or something like that."*

## **Conclusion:**

This Pure Research Project focused on an ongoing, often pressing need in theatre to meet the growing demands of diverse storytelling. While the experiments raised many of the current challenges in casting racialized actors over 55, ideas from these experiments also showed really exciting opportunities and potential for new approaches that build capacity.

The Community Actor Weekend Intensive also demonstrated a large area of opportunity for engaging racialized community actors who are wanting to engage with acting later in their lives. It confirmed there is an interest in such initiatives from members of this demographic. It also showed what some of the barriers and driving motivations for members of this group are, and what skills, gaps, and questions community actors may be bringing into the room.

The data gathered through this project generated tangible ideas for moving beyond short-term solutions towards developing sustainable strategies when companies are casting racialized actors over 55. Beyond the ideas explored, the focus group model itself was a fruitful experiment! The collaborative problem-solving model offered a rare opportunity for theatre industry professionals to collectively discuss a challenge many companies have been facing alone on an ongoing basis.

This type of collective industry problem-solving and sharing of experiences could be used when thinking through other large questions in theatre. The generative benefits of this model (and potential partnerships and initiatives that naturally spring about when members of the industry are together in one room!) was a successful example of this mode of problem-solving design.

This Pure Research Project also intersects with a growing topic of research and interest within the wider Canadian theatre industry: aging. Members from the focus group discussed how the lack of older bodies on stage can limit theatre's ability to capture the full range of human experience.

In recent years, initiatives such as [The CREATUS Project](#) (2023) have built upon previous initiatives, activism, and research to explore the ways that older professional artists can be supported to work into their later years of life, continue lending their talent, and decrease their marginalization in the theatre industry. This Pure Research project intersects with this increasing and exciting area of research. Though this research focuses on persons who haven't been able to join the industry rather than on individuals who have been impeded in continuing their careers, the issues of access and participation for older people extends across demographics.

The increased emphasis on access in these areas can support the growing visibility of racialized and older content in theatre, and the authenticity, presence, and wisdom older actors can bring to rehearsal spaces and Canadian stages.

Increasingly however, companies and producers are being held accountable for not only conducting the necessary outreach to find artists who may be difficult to find, but also in being part of building the talent pool in cases where they may not be enough professional artists due to historic marginalization.