

SOULPEPPER THEATRE COMPANY

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION REPORT

AFP FELLOWSHIP IN INCLUSION &
PHILANTHROPY

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DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION REPORT

BACKGROUND

This project will develop an actionable diversity and inclusion (“D & I”) strategy and implementation plan for Soulpepper Theatre Company.

In 2015, Soulpepper announced a bold vision to become a National Civic Theatre, **a place of belonging** for artists, audiences, and aspirants. Central to this commitment is creating a platform for Canadian voices to be heard, to reflect the myriad of communities and cultures that have collectively defined the vibrancy of this country. Inherent to realizing this vision is the role of inclusivity, both on-stage and off with artists, staff and volunteers, to supporting an environment where the diverse breadth of Canadian talent can not only succeed, but thrive.

This project will interview various Soulpepper stakeholders who are new to or familiar with the company including artists, administrative staff and board members to provide context for how diversity and inclusion are understood, as well as how Soulpepper is perceived to fit within the greater dialogue.

This investigation will create a foundation to build upon, to identify the gaps that Soulpepper will need to address in order to be industry leaders in the evolving dialogue around D & I and its role in theatre. As we all know, leadership is about people. Leadership is also about learning, and asking questions that may not have answers.

This project will aim to help chart a future that is inclusive, to deliver on a promise to our stakeholders to reflect who we are and where we live by sharing the stories of our communities and nation. A promise as complex and far-reaching as this will require time and leadership that exceeds the scope of this project. As such, this project will focus on the developing a base of understanding. It will define what “a place of belonging” means to Soulpepper, through the analysis of its history and interviews with stakeholders. The project will include a defined strategy, and recommend a “commitment to Diversity & Inclusion” mandate to support the creation of an inclusive milieu and to help fulfill Soulpepper’s pledge to become a National Civic Theatre.

METHODOLOGY

I chose to do qualitative research, as a sense of belonging cannot be measured in numbers. The method selected was to host private one-on-one semi-structured interviews, where the conversation was guided by one specific set of seven questions, but there were opportunities to probe and explore each answer when necessary. This method allows respondents the freedom to express their views in their own terms, though the level of

openness is determined by how comfortable and candid they felt during the interview process.

The criteria for potential interviewees were based on representing a diverse range of voices, both in relationship to the company as well as background and perspective. A total of 12 stakeholders were identified, and all 12 responded to the request for an interview.

The questions were open-ended to allow for interpretation by the respondent, as well as to avoid leading the dialogue in a specific direction. Respondents were not recorded.

RESPONDENT LIST

Respondent	Qualifier
	Artist, Artistic Associate Director, Fellow
	Artist, Academy Graduate, Artistic Director's Circle
	Artist
	Staff
	Staff
	imagiNation Artist
	Artist, Academy Graduate
	Artist, Artistic Associate Director, Fellow
	Founding Member
	Staff, Fringe Board Member
	imagiNation Artist
	Board Member, Donor

* Names have been blacked out for anonymity.

QUESTIONS

- What do the words diversity and inclusion mean to you? Is it an important issue to you?
- How would you describe the current status of diversity and inclusion as a broader issue within the arts?
- Where do you feel Soulpepper fits in with your view about diversity and inclusion in the arts?
- At Soulpepper, we describe ourselves as a place of belonging. What does that mean to you?
- What is your vision for diversity and inclusion in the arts? What would the ideal look like?
- What steps would be necessary to achieve this vision?
- How would you measure success?

TIMELINE

TASK	TIMELINE
Identify key stakeholders and set up interviews	February – April
Meet with interviewees	April – May
Write and submit project findings and recommendations including strategy and plan	May
Report findings and recommendations to leadership at Soulpepper	June

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The very first question asked respondents to define the words diversity and inclusion, to help provide context for the direction of the conversation. Across the board, there were some generalities (understanding that it reflects a diverse range of voices), however as respondents brought their experiences to their answers, what stood out was the variance in answers.

EXAMINING THE TERMINOLOGY

- **Diversity:** In the broadest sense, diversity describes any dimension that could be used to differentiate people; it includes but is not limited to demographic considerations like ethnicity, gender, age, nationality, class, sexual orientation, education, and religion. It impacts our perspectives, experiences and life styles.

Diversity is about what makes us different. In its root, it is tied to division and part of that is defining why we are not all the same.

Throughout my various interviews, it was apparent however that diversity meant something different to each person, though the root of the meaning stayed the same. Diversity is about representation. In a city like Toronto, where people have come from all over the world, diversity can be seen on the streets, on streetcars and in cafes. The need to have cultural institutions reflect this cannot be overstated especially in a city with over 1 million inhabitants having been born outside of Canada in a total of 2.8 million inhabitants.

Inclusion: In the simplest terms, inclusion is about feeling valued, respected and supported. It is about creating the right conditions for each person to succeed, regardless of their background. Inclusion, of course, at its root includes the concept of including. To marry with the understanding of diversity, inclusion is connected to representation.

In conversation with various respondents, this term was also understood in different ways though the notion of celebrating differences, and creating space for all voices came up in different capacities. Inclusion is thought of as a more deliberate strategy, and is seen as a way to take action and capture the nuances of a truly diverse city.

- **Belonging:** For me, belonging was an important concept to understand, not only because we call Soulpepper a “place of belonging” but because it captures our mandate to be a home, to artists and audiences.

Some respondents felt this question was personal; it was a feeling that was hard to describe. The idea of feeling at home came up, a space where you felt welcome, seen and heard. Across all stakeholders, the notion of familiarity and the opportunity to be who you are were seen as imperative to creating a place of belonging.

In one particular conversation, the idea of belonging being a story came up, and the question asked was “is there space for my story within this?” I felt that this was a powerful concept, that belonging is part of a fluid narrative.

*“Diversity is being invited to the party;
inclusion is being asked to dance.”*

-Verna Myers

WHERE THE ARTS AND SOULPEPPER FIT IN

I first asked respondents how they felt about the issue of diversity and inclusion in the arts, to create context to better understand how Soulpepper was perceived to fit in with this view.

Across the arts as an industry, there was a general consensus that the conversation around diversity and inclusion was tiring. The time for action, though now, has in some ways already passed. Change is necessary, but the necessity in and of itself is part of the problem.

There was an acknowledgement, especially amongst artists that change in the industry is becoming more evident, however there were concerns that as a “hot topic”, there is an inauthenticity and mistrust towards new strategies, especially with funding concerns looming. With this, the concept of questioning why you’re being invited to the table rose—the fear of being tokenized as a part of a collection of shapes and colours, rather than implementing effectual change. Another concern is that the topic of diversity and inclusion is a trend, and the strategies to address the issue are Band-Aid solutions rather than a fundamental shift in culture and organizational structure.

In regards to Soulpepper, it was acknowledged by all respondents that real changes are taking place. For those who are familiar with Soulpepper's community programming, there was genuine appreciation for the outreach work with youth more specifically.

Soulpepper is seen as an organization that is working on the issue, and creating opportunities for more voices. For artists in particular, Soulpepper was seen as a company who is taking action. However, the need to prove over time and through continued action, the authenticity of motivation is still necessary.

In terms of innovation, and looking to the future, a desire to see a diverse range of artists in both traditional and nontraditional roles, on stage and off came up in a question asking about what real inclusion would look and feel like. The ideal for most respondents came back to what I interpret to be reflective of the need and desire to belong somewhere, in a space where no one questions why you're there, not even you.

LIMITATIONS

As all of the respondents were connected to Soulpepper, there was one important limitation to the research conducted. As it was not anonymous, and involved face-to-face interaction there may have been elements of being politically correct, especially over such a prominent and current topic.

In addition, this research would be stronger and offer a larger breadth of perspectives if there was an opportunity to include more respondents, including those of more external candidates like donors at different levels and audience members. This was difficult as without personal relationships, to incite this conversation could have various repercussions, and it would be difficult to find the right sample respondents.

However, within the scope of this project, the respondents provided rich and varied perspectives and discussion for exploration.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

It is difficult to summarize candid, personal and thoughtful conversations into a few closing words. Diversity and inclusion is so much more than a necessary strategy for funding. It needs to be a core value; it needs to be integrated into all actions, as a natural part of an organizational framework rather than a standalone strategy.

At Soulpepper, there is a collective movement towards creating a truly inclusive experience and environment. In order to realize this vision across all streams including artists, audiences, advocates, aspirants and administrative staff, some recommendations include:

1. **Defining Soulpepper's commitment to diversity and inclusion in a shared document.** The work is already being done, but it is important to communicate what we mean when we say "diversity and inclusion," and what we mean when we say we are "taking action." It not only holds us accountable to deliver on our

promises, it emphasizes our authenticity to all our stakeholders, and legitimizes our efforts.

2. **Education and training.** It is important to provide education and training to company staff and artists as well as board members to better understand what changes are taking place to create a more inclusive environment, and more importantly, why these changes are happening. While diversity and inclusion are topics that most people are familiar with, as a guiding principle, it needs to be unpacked. This can occur at all staff meetings, board meetings, or through the sharing of the aforementioned document, or other resources.
3. **Transformation.** This idea of transformation came up in my last interview, and it helped to frame so much of my thinking around the issue. For diversity and inclusion strategies to be successfully adopted and implemented into the fabric of an organization there needs to be transformation at both the personal and organizational levels.

This will come through education and training, however, for those who represent Soulpepper on the stage, and off, there has to be embracement or transformation that will be guided by the core values of the organization, one of which is inclusion. “Buy-in” is important across all levels of the company.

4. **Keep going.** It is an uncomfortable conversation and it is difficult to prove the motivation for implementing any strategies. With funding requirements in the arts, changing, the question of intent will come up. It is difficult to answer why it is an issue now and was not before. But changes are happening, and whether Soulpepper has arrived to the table late or not, the changes are very real. Only time will prove authenticity, but a diversity and inclusion strategy will lay the foundation for a truly inclusive future, within the company and in the arts.

Please view [Prezi](#) for an overview of the project, as well as additional quotes and findings from my research.

*“Infinite diversity in infinite combinations...
symbolizing the elements that create truth and beauty.”*
-Commander Spock, Star Trek