

TryLight Theatre Co.
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September 23, 2013

Common Ground Research Forum:

TryLight Theatre in the Summer, formerly known as The Living History Project has wrapped up its third season. In 2011 the TryLight Board of Directors gave approval to undertake a summer program which would focus on employing youth in our region interested in pursuing dramatic arts, provide entertainment and education through live theatre to local and seasonal visitors as part of Kenora's plan to promote tourism, to provide a venue for cross cultural expansion and to expand our vision of "spreading the love of live theatre".

In 2011 TryLight Theatre undertook the Downtown Stories walking tour which told stories, through vignettes performed on the streets of downtown Kenora, of historical events that happened in our area. These stories focused on traditional settler and Anishinaabe stories researched through the museum and checked for accuracy by the museum staff. We employed a troupe of 6 local young people. The tour took place twice daily for 6 weeks.

In 2012 we hired Toronto playwright Dennis Hassel to visit Kenora with the purpose of interviewing settlers and Anishinaabe people and have them tell their stories on the importance of the lakes, rivers and water to their lives. He was able to take their stories and developed the Water Stories tour. It was imperative that we have youths of First Nation and/or Metis heritage as part of our summer troupe so the stories centred on their heritage are told with authenticity. We employed 7 local youths which included 1 First Nations and 1 Metis students. These stories were performed in the courtyard of the museum 5 days a week for 6 weeks along with the walking tour of downtown.

In 2013 we continued the 2 tours and added a 3rd component of a full length play. This was written by local playwright Phil Burke and centred on the name change of our town from Rat Portage to Kenora. We were very fortunate to have 2 talented First Nation actors and 1 Metis actress join our troupe.

The undertaking of bringing live summer theatre to Kenora presented challenges and rewards. The first obstacles were to prepare a budget, secure funding and to develop an advertising campaign to promote the season. We had never attempted such a project so had only a vague idea on the costs involved and the logistics necessary to make it happen. Thankfully Teika heard about our undertaking and thought it would be a good fit with the CGRF and guided us through the application process. Her knowledge and assistance gave us some necessary tools and confidence to proceed with other grant applications. The shift from volunteer actors to paid performers posed challenges as we had to deal with government agencies and their requirements for hiring, scheduling, time sheets, safety regulations, government remittances and records of employment. It was a process that was initially painful but has come to be easier as the seasons progressed. We attempted to work with the local tourism department and businesses to promote the Downtown Walking tour in the first year and employed our regular format of posters and leaflets for advertising the summer program. We learned over the course of the first season that we did not have a wide enough reach and our audience numbers reflected that. We expanded our print material and distribution locations, used local radio, contacted First Nation organizations and groups about our program and attempted to advertise through the TryLight website and social media the second season and our numbers did increase although not as much as we had hoped. This past season we put together a more cohesive campaign using TryLight colours in large banners displayed at various locations about town, we continued the theme with posters and finger signs, invited tourism, hotel, restaurant and First Nation and Metis personnel to attend free tours so they could promote the tour first hand, updated our website and had facebook chatter regularly posted. We were disappointed by the lack of response we received to our offer of free tours by service personnel but despite that our numbers did improve.

At the close of our second season we formed a working group composed of local people who have an interest in TryLight and in promoting tourism in our community. We are extremely grateful for their input and took their suggestions seriously and made some positive changes. We streamlined our scheduling so that it allowed for weekend and evening performances, we brought Water Stories indoors away from the glaring sun, thunderstorms and biting insects. It was performed on our stage nightly and every Wed. it was performed at the Discovery Centre with free admission. We made the theatre the ticket outlet and offered online ticket sales. We revamped the Downtown Stories walking tour to accommodate the theatre as the start and end point and included new vignettes to the tour. Using the theatre space allowed us to display an exhibit of Anishinaabe traditional foods lent to us by the museum. This added to the cross cultural component as everyone entering was able to view and discuss it. We upgraded the outside courtyard at the theatre which we used as the gathering place for the tours and as the entrance to the theatre. The addition of the full length play was a positive move but presented its own set of problems which we hadn't anticipated. Additional staffing and salaries, rescheduling employee hours, securing TryLight volunteers were a number of issues raised.

Our audience numbers grew significantly this year as we become better known in the tourism arena and we are encouraged by the comments we have received. The new vignettes, tour route and use of the Kenricia lobby for Downtown Stories added interest and humour and made the historical content come alive. Water Stories continues to be a valuable asset cross culturally and the emotional impact it has on all who see it invites thought and discussion. The full length production increased our audience reach and added much needed funds to our coffers.

The TryLight Board undertook this project with the understanding that it would take 5 years to grow. At the close of each season we review the program to see if it has meet the objectives we had initially set out. We have been able to offer employment to local youths. We have provided a venue for cross cultural discussion and understanding. We have developed a program to enhance entertainment and education of our historical past and future in the tourism sector. We have been able to expand on our vision of spreading the love of live theatre.

We will continue to grow the summer program as long as we can achieve growth with each season and secure the funding we require to go on. Involving the First Nation segment of our population continues to be a challenge for us. We will continue to try to engage them by offering performances at venues of their choice, including groups, organizations and businesses in our advertising, inviting comments and suggestions and continuing to be an open and accessible venue for all who come through our doors.

Thank you for your financial support. Without it, I'm not sure we would have evolved to the point we have.

Lyn MacKay
Admin. Director
TryLight Theatre Co.