

# BEING TOGETHER

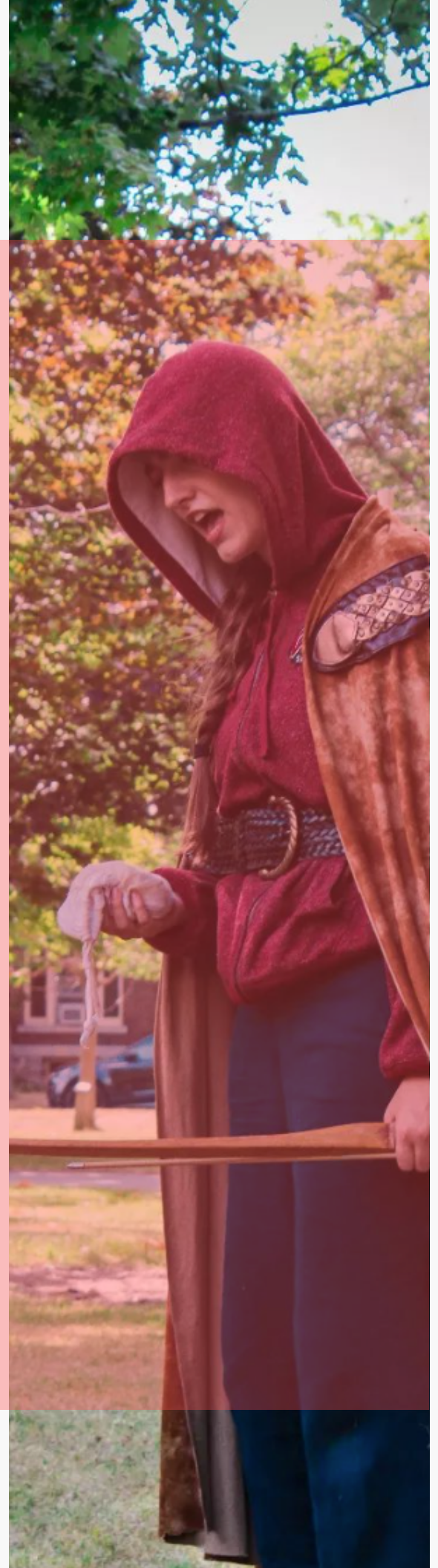
Audience perceptions on co-presence

2022



# CONTENTS

1. THE TEAM
2. INTRODUCTION
3. METHOD
8. COVID, CO-PRESENCE & COMMUNITY
12. ETIQUETTE & EXPECTATIONS
16. EXPLORING PARTICIPATION
20. GOING FORWARD
21. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



# THE TEAM

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# INTRODUCTION



This report archives the second round of the Being Together project, a collaboration between the Dan School of Drama and Music at Queen's University and the Kick and Push Festival. This project seeks to better understand how audiences make sense of the concept of co-presence during theatre performance.

As we continue to move forward from the initial wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are in the process of re-learning what it means to share physical space with one another, making an investigation of audience perceptions of co-presence especially relevant. Since the shift back to in person theatre performance, several conversations have emerged in the news raising concerns and questioning theatre's viability post-pandemic. The opportunity to interview audiences at the Kick and Push Festival helped allow us to document the audience perspective of the return to in-person theatre over the course of two years. The conversations had with Kick and Push audiences shed light on what was resonating most as people came together to gather again for theatre. In doing so, the audience perspective is brought forth into ongoing discussion of theatre's position as we move forward from the pandemic. This report will examine themes that lived front of mind for audience members during testimonials, as well as offer considerations for theatre creators at the Kick and Push Festival.



# METHOD



## Data Collection

In the second leg of the project, we continued our pursuit to gain insight on how audiences perceive how they share space with one another during theatre performance. We once again used semi-structured interviews for our research, inviting participants from the audiences of *New Societies*, *Robin Hood*, and *Return of the Megafauna*. During the interviews, participants were invited to share their perspective on how they understand the role of the audience, what they like/dislike about being an audience member, as well as how they make sense of ideas of liveness and realness when attending performance as audience members.

Our interviews took place from August-September, divided into two phases: group and individual interviews. In contrast to year 1 of the project, the 2022 COVID safety guidelines allowed for group interviews to take place in-person on-site immediately following the performances. As a result, our group interviews were coloured with the energy and embodied feelings people were experiencing right after attending a performance. Individual interviews took place over zoom with participants throughout the month of September. Year 2 consisted of 18 group interviews and 13 individual interviews, totalling 56 participants.

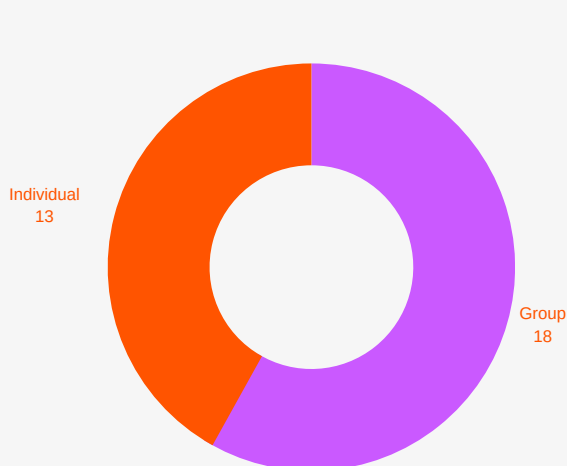


FIG. 1: YEAR 2 INTERVIEW BREAKDOWN

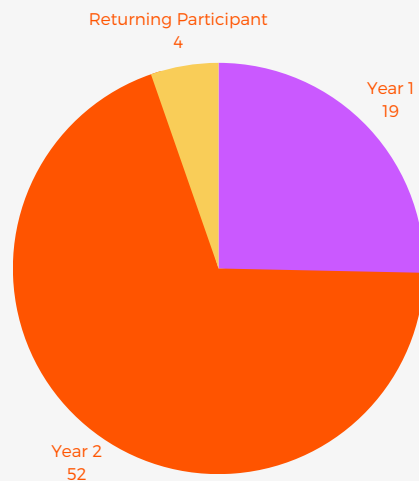


FIG. 2: PARTICIPANT BREAKDOWN YEARS 1 & 2

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# METHOD



## Analysis

The consensually recorded interviews were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo, a software that allowed us to trace patterns and re-occurring themes between audience conversations. This analysis was often completed collaboratively, sparking lively discussion amongst the team. Throughout this process, the team documented ideas that emerged from the data in the form of blog posts which married the interview data with scholarly material that was concurrently being studied. As a result of the vast range of themes and topics covered in the Kick and Push 2022 season, our blog posts spanned across numerous topics, including those of citizenship, audience accessibility, and relationships of power in performance.

Both year 1 and year 2 of the project provided many of the student research assistants with their first opportunities to present scholarly research both internally and externally. In each year of the project, the team gathered to take part in an internal conference where each member presented a conference-style paper created from the ideas that surfaced from the data. Members of the team also attended the Canadian Association for Theatre Research (CATR) conference in both 2022 and 2023. Titles of these presentations can be found on the next page.

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# A Glimpse: Research Output



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***Feeling Together: Boundaries, Exchanges, and Shared Spaces Amongst Audience Members (2023)***

Paper presentation delivered by  
Dr. Kelsey Jacobson and Bethany Schaufler-Biback  
at the Canadian Association for Theatre Research Conference

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***The Stickiness of Impact: Tracing Policy to Public (2023)***

Paper presentation delivered by Meghan Lindsay  
at the Canadian Association for Theatre Research Conference

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***Recollections on Re-Collecting: Inviting Self-Theorizing in Audience Interviews About Theatrical Copresence (2022)***

Paper presentation delivered by  
Dr. Kelsey Jacobson and Jacob Pittini  
at the Canadian Association for Theatre Research

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# METHOD



## Positioning Our Work



The found meanings and interpretation of the words of our audience members have been influenced by each of our team members' individual lived experiences. The findings shared in this report do not envelop all of the ideas and experiences shared by the audience members who took part in our interviews and only share a brief snapshot of what was discussed in our many conversations.

The work conducted on this project took place while our research team was residing in Katarokwi/Kingston, Tkaronto/Toronto, and Tiohtià:ke/Montreal. As scholars who work out of Queen's University, we acknowledge that we, alongside our institution, live and work as uninvited guests on the territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek peoples. We understand that this territory is included in the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and the Confederacy of the Ojibwe and Allied Nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. There is also a significant Metis community as well as First Peoples from other Nations across Turtle Island present here today.

We also acknowledge the role academic institutions have in sustaining systemic oppression. We acknowledge the harm that has been caused and continues to be caused by academic institutions under the guise of research. Going through this project as researchers and settlers, we sought to consider our role in decolonizing research through acknowledging the limitations of our research as a result of our position and the inherent subjectivity of our work. This was especially important as much of this project is reliant on the use of colonial constructs of theatre to communicate and disseminate understandings from our interviews.

### Allow me to introduce myself

My name is Bethany Schauffer-Biback and I am the author of this report. I write this report as a newly graduated Queen's Drama student, and an incoming Master's student at the University of Toronto's Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies.

My reading of this data is inevitably informed by my position as a white, settler, queer, neurodivergent, student, researcher, and theatre practitioner who is passionate about theorizing about accessibility and the influence of feeling in theatre.



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Can you describe how you're feeling in one word having just seen the show?

### Robin Hood

*Elated*      *Smiley*  
*Tingling*      *Fun*  
*Joyful*      *Energetic*  
*Engaging*      *Satisfied*  
*Light-hearted*      *Light*

### New Societies

*Triumphant*      *Introspective*  
*Energized*      *Interested*  
*Conflicted*      *Provoked*  
*Changed*      *Anxious*  
*Curious*      *Confused*

### Return of the Megafauna

*Peaceful*      *Calm*  
*Relaxed*      *Tranquil*  
*Inquisitive*      *Meditative state*  
*Fuzzy*  
*Scared. I'm quite afraid of sloths*

# COVID, CO-PRESENCE & COMMUNITY



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*Just the joy of hearing live performing music. And how much kind of that was missed and how much we took it for granted, I think. Right?*

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*So...I missed being around human beings in ways I didn't even know I missed until I started coming to performances again.*

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*So. Even so, I think that it's just something out of I think the experience was enhanced because of what we've been through over the last two years.*

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## COVID, COMMUNITY & CO-PRESENCE



In 2021, many of our interviewees shared that the shows attended at the Kick and Push were their first return to in person theatre. A year later, the impact of COVID on theatre remained front of mind for many audience members of the 2022 Kick and Push season. In discussions of what makes theatre feel live, real, and an overall a positive experience, audience members often compared their experience with online theatre to the performance they had just attended in person at the Kick and Push Festival.

Interviewees recounted feeling pleasure in being able to share physical space with one another again, deeming physical co-presence as imperative to the creation of theatre. This emphasis on physical co-presence specifically plays a role in the communal and collective feelings that are frequently associated with attending theatre. Many audience members who had experienced online performances identified a gap in the experience. They shared that when watching a performance online, they did not feel a part of a greater collective that is often achieved when watching performances in person. As such, many expressed that attending online performances left them feeling disconnected from the performance and dissatisfied with the experience.

Audience members identify “power” in the community that is created by a group of strangers when sharing physical space in the theatre with one another. Many view it as novel and note that they don’t get to experience the feelings of “togetherness” within this community elsewhere beyond theatre. In discussing what makes physical co-presence so important to the audience community, one audience member highlighted its novelty and described their relationship to the audience community as being one where “it doesn’t matter, like your creator, political affiliation, it’s just community in a sense. You don’t really got it in a lot of spaces”.

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# FOR CONSIDERATION



*Like, I think absolutely there's something really powerful about being in that collective and being a part of that kind of shared identity and shared sense that comes out of it.*

How do theatre productions and companies invite audience members who exist beyond the 'typical' theatre audience community spoken about by these interviewees?

Are there other ways to create a collective without physical co-presence amongst audience members?

*You're connected with this group of strangers for a moment, and in that moment there's a togetherness.*

# ETIQUETTE & EXPECTATIONS



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*There is like a contract between like you, the people around you, and the performers um that I personally felt a lot of relief in not having to adhere to on certain things*

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*I don't like the rigidity of social contracts as audience members in theatre*

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*Sometimes you feel...sometimes you feel like so trapped and helpless. And the experience where it's like, this is the performance, it's happening, this is the social code, this is what I'm expecting you do*

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## ETIQUETTE & EXPECTATIONS



Similarly to year 1, the perceived expectations that accompany the audience role were a great topic of discussion amongst audience participants. As noted by Meghan Lindsay in the year 1 report, audience members frequently discussed the expectations they feel are prescribed to the role of audience member. Most often these expectations coincided with audience members' perceptions of what it means to be a "good audience member", detailing the various understood conventions of Western theatre etiquette such as sitting still, remaining quiet, and performing attention for the duration of the performance.

Many conversations had in year 2 demonstrated great focus on a dislike or discomfort surrounding a performance's expectations of etiquette. Some audience members described their experience with etiquette as feeling "trapped" and "helpless" due to a felt responsibility to abide within this "social code". When asked to share what they disliked about being an audience member, many accredited this feeling of forced adherence to etiquette expectations to negative experiences as an audience member. Given the audience members' position to viewing their role in theatre as essential to the creation and sustainability of theatre, feelings of displeasure and discomfort with theatre's enforced etiquette creates tension for audience members who wish to not adhere to etiquette norms.

Many audience members who attended *Robin Hood* shared their experience at this performance reimagined how they have encountered etiquette in theatre. The same audience members who expressed displeasure with audience etiquette were widely receptive to the structure of *Robin Hood*. Many noted that the show taking place outside in an open-air venue helped to alleviate the constraints of etiquette expectations. Audience members noted that these feelings were further affirmed by the pre-show announcement assuring audience members that it was a casual environment, encouraging them to do whatever was necessary for them to enjoy the performance.



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# FOR CONSIDERATION



*I mean, with the person that has ADHD, sitting still and having to pay attention for a very long periods of time is not a good time*

What social code does the Kick and Push Festival want to promote for their audiences?

Who does this perceived etiquette benefit? Who does it not?

How can theatre artists re-examine etiquette within their productions?

*Watching a show like everybody understands, like those predetermined audience, like, etiquette things um that everyone is going to comply by*

# EXPLORING PARTICIPATION: RELATIONSHIPS & RESPONSIBILITY



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*They provide a safe environment for you to explore your role. So, they're not gonna let you go completely off the narrative. They kind of guide you through it step by step.*

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*It's an allergy shot. It's like, I know I'm going to react, but it's like I'm under control, right? And so I'm comfortable with that.*

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*Interactive theatre excels when people...are allowed to play and have the invitation to understand well, both the invitation to play, but also understand the boundaries.*

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## EXPLORING PARTICIPATION



For many of our interviewees, their attendance at New Societies marked one of, if not their first experience with participatory game theatre. Amongst the feelings of confusion, contemplation, and curiosity, these audience members expressed an overall excitement at the opportunity to experience a piece of theatre that diverged from their repertoire. These conversations demonstrated a great focus on the perceived responsibility of the facilitator as well as the presence of their fellow audience members.

When acknowledging that engagement with participatory theatre is often a source of discomfort for some of the interviewees, they highlighted the role of the performer during these encounters. Many described the trust they put in the performers to not lead them astray and help them navigate the narrative. This trust appears to stem from an understanding that the performers have an extensive comprehension of the performance and therefore will be able to guide the audience members through the performance in a safe and unharmed way. In turn, this seems to encourage audience members to step out of their comfort zone.

One audience member referred to her understanding of participatory theatre as an “allergy shot”. She explained that when attending a performance that is marketed as participatory, she expects to be taken out of her comfort zone and have some sort of reaction. She is comfortable with these expectations because she views the theatre as a controlled space to have this reaction, exhibiting likeness to receiving an allergy shot in a doctor’s office. This analogy points to the indispensable responsibility held by the performers towards the audience during participatory performance.

Interestingly, this responsibility is not only held by the performers, but also self-imposed by audience members with participatory theatre experience. One audience member shared that when attending participatory theatre they are cognizant of the enjoyment of their fellow audience members which ultimately influences how they conduct themselves throughout the performance. This self-imposed responsibility may highlight this audience member’s understanding of the risk and vulnerability often associated with participatory theatre.

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# FOR CONSIDERATION



*My mind when I'm doing participatory theatre like this I wanna have a good time, but I also want to make sure the people I'm participating with are having a good time*

How else do performers establish trust with their audience members during participatory performance?

What is the audience's responsibility to their fellow audience members during participatory performance? How is this communicated? Does it need to be?

*You do have your boundaries pushed, you do have a sense uh, of exploration in in in situations. But uh, there are people there who know the storyline who will bring you along that path*

# Moving Forward



The conversations had with audience members at the Kick and Push Festival have offered us significant insight into how audience members make sense of their experience attending theatre, as well as what sorts of experiential elements live front of mind and have immense impact on their overall individual experience. The findings shared in this report reveal a silver of the complex perspectives and opinions put forth by the audience participants. The vast range of outlooks, understandings, and experiences with theatre shared by audience members reaffirm our understanding that audiences are not a monolith, with each individual audience member encountering a unique experience while attending the theatre— some of which are shared and others that are not.

Through this partnership, it is our hope to have shared some productive insight into the audiences who attend the Kick and Push Festival, as well as examine how academic partnerships can live within the arts industry that is present on the land we now call Canada

288: 00:31:23,070 --> 00:31:30,420

(Int) Bethany Schaufler-Biback: All right. Well, that was the last question. So is there any other thoughts that you may have- that may have come up that you wanted to share? Any last comments?

289: 00:31:31,080 --> 00:31:35,050

(Aud) Maeve Hannigan: I like the theatre. [Laughs]

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Being Together: Audience Perceptions on Co-presence 2022 is based on the second stage of the SSHRC funded research project Being Together. This project is a collaboration with the Dan School of Drama and Music at Queen's University and the Kick and Push Festival in Kingston.

We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to Liam Karry and Kick and Push Festival team for your continued support, collaboration, and willingness to welcome our team into your festival for the past two years.

We would also like to give our upmost thanks to all of the audience members who took the time to participate in our interviews and share their vibrant and perceptive insights.

## **Our Research Team**

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Jacob Pittini  
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