

Reflections on *Breathing Northwinds - Forum 2007 – Manitoulin Island*

A Province Wide Gathering of Community Based Artists

Presented by Community Arts Ontario in Partnership with Debajehmujig Theatre Group

June 8,9,10, 2007

Hosted by the neighbouring communities of Wikwemikong Unceded First Nation and the town of Manitowaning, Manitoulin Island.

A Report on the Provincial Gathering for Bridge Building and Bridge Builders in the Art of Communities of Northern Ontario

Edited and Prepared by Ron Berti from videotape recordings conducted during the *Breathing Northwinds* Forum

Text Version

Also available with full-colour photos from the forum

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Reflections on *Breathing Northwinds Forum 2007- Manitoulin Island*

During the first week of June, 2007 a provincial gathering of community based arts practitioners and stakeholders was held on Manitoulin Island called *Breathing Northwinds*. Organized by Community Arts Ontario in partnership with De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Group, it was hosted in the neighbouring communities of Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve and the town of Manitowaning. For three days, over 120 delegates came together, twice what was anticipated, in order to reflect on the collective identity and potential of Northern Ontario arts practitioners and cultural/arts organizations. The gathering would be the inaugural event of a multi-year initiative supported by the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Additional support specifically for the artists at the forum was provided by the Canada Council for the Arts and the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Breathing Northwinds was publicized and promoted by Community Arts Ontario and De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Group through their websites, membership and services, press releases, newsletter and flyers, PSA's, CBC North Radio interview, written invitations, posters, email, paid advertising in the Manitoulin Expositor, and by making direct phone calls to our contacts.

Much of the information contained in this document is simply opinions and ideas transcribed directly from the videotapes that recorded the forum events and conversations. We have resisted much interpretation or analysis, as stakeholders will want different types of information for different reasons, and ultimately, we want this to be useful resource.

On Friday June 8, 2007, a Pre-Conference Session was co-hosted by the Arts Network for Children and Youth (ANCY) and Breathing Northwinds. The purpose was to focus specifically on the creative needs of children and youth in Northern Ontario, and to hear about developments in the field nationally as shared by ANCY director Linda Albright. Following are some of the key elements of the discussion:

Core Issues Raised in Child and Youth Programming in Northern Ontario

For Northern work, it was noted that visiting artists from the South and other regions are not always well briefed on the values of process over product. Little is known or understood about the Northern communities, their dynamics or the specific challenges faced by youth growing up in the mid and far North.

Youth life and family life in Northern Ontario have changed dramatically in the last 15 years. There is little community cohesion as service clubs and community organizations have either closed their operations or reduced their levels of community service due to budgetary and other economic constraints at the community level.

A gender issue was raised by delegates in the Northwest, that more attention is paid to child and youth engagement for boys through sport, with girls accommodated as an "add – on" to the boys sport leagues. There is significantly more infrastructure for recreational sports, than for arts and culture.

Northern Arts are not institutionally based, as there are few arts organizations and fewer with stable operations. This poses a challenge in the search for regional sustainability for artists and practitioners. Most arts policy at all levels of government assumes an arts community with a variety of facilities, galleries, and performance houses for public presentation.

Child and youth needs are most effectively met through time with a consistent circle of caring relationships, spread across a network, which encompasses a broad spectrum of community. We need to shift the thinking about providing support to artists at the local level.

Practitioners from the North West were specifically interested in information and concepts that would help them make the case locally. Regions dominated by the natural resource sector have a special challenge in making the case for consistent arts programming for children and youth.

Currently existing regional galleries and museums are under utilized. Many innovative interdisciplinary projects are becoming increasingly attractive to youth and emerging artists.

We need to shift our thinking regionally about community based and professional work, allowing new hybrid forms to develop and gain strength. Community based, more organic models of program development and growth will be most effective and beneficial in this area.

Friday June 8, 2007

Forum Registration and the opening of the *Breathing Northwinds Artist and Artisan Fair*

As host community, Wikwemikong artists and artisans were featured throughout the weekend in an exhibit and fair at the Amikook Centre. The artists were available to meet and to talk about their work, both with forum delegates and the general public who were made aware through regional advertising. Many artists engaged in their practice on site, and shared meals with the forum delegates. There was no cost to the artists to set up and display, for publicity, or for meals, and 100% of the proceeds from the sale of their art went to the artists.

Artists included: Barry Beaver, Leland Bell, William Bondy, Michael Cywink, Allen Garrett, Bruno Henry, James Jacko, Carolyn Jacko, Blain Lewis, Heather Manitowabi, Mary Lou Manitowabi, Nikki Manitowabi, James Simon Mishibinjima, Dolly Peltier, Josh Peltier, Bobby Pheasant, Karen Pheasant, Mary Pheasant, Bill Shawanda, Veda Trudeau, and Christine Williston.

Welcoming Feast and Welcoming Wishes by Cultural Elder Eddie King

During the welcoming feast, Joe Osawabine (Artistic Director of Debajehmujig Theatre Group and member of the Wikwemikong First Nation) introduced Cultural Elder Eddie King to welcome people to Manitoulin Island. Eddie shared with everyone how the territory in which we were gathered is the home of the people of the Three Fires Confederacy – the Odawa, the Ojibway, and the Pottawatami. He spoke of the challenges faced by northern communities, particularly those in fly-in communities who rely on ice-roads.

Eddie explained that historically first nations people, even though they spoke different languages, gathered and exchanged between northern and southern Ontario. They came together for trade, and shared tribal ceremonies with respect and honour, knowing at least, that they all shared a common interest in mother earth. Eddie suggests that even today, all cultures should be able to come together under a shared value around the drum, with the understanding that passing down traditional knowledge and stories is for the preservation of all humanity.

Eddie closed with his wishes for a successful gathering and safe journey to travelers.

Welcoming Address by Ron Berti, Executive Director of Debajehmujig Theatre Group

Ron Berti welcomed everyone on behalf of CAO and Debaj, and extended regrets of Zainab Amadahy with acknowledgments of her extensive preparatory work on this initiative. Ron read the article "*Something is in the Air in Northern Ontario*". Some general house-keeping was followed by an invitation to move to the Hub Centre for the performance of a new work by Debajehmujig Theatre Group, commissioned by *Breathing Northwinds*, to explore the concept of bridge building and bridge builders. It is called, *The Gulch*.

Saturday June 9, 2007

Field Exercises – Resource Identification Games

The day began with a group breakfast, late registration, and an opportunity to chat while people assembled at Amikook Park. As breakfast ended, forum participants were casually integrated to help construct a baseball field size map of Ontario, using stakes with the names of the communities each participant came from. These stakes were planted in the ground after measuring off the relative distances using coloured ropes for highways, flights, and train routes.

While this was going on, others gathered in circles for warm-up and relationship building games.

All delegates moved to the map of Ontario and stood on the community where they usually reside. To the rhythm of a drumbeat, people began moving along the rope highways and railways and airways, to their destination on Manitoulin Island.

- Population density and relative isolation became evident. (Look how far away Bob is from everyone else, up there in Summer Beaver! He looks so lonely!)
- Distance and travel time are independent considerations. You might have to spend a day in Sioux Lookout and not travel at all. Or you might have to return to a previous stop on your route, actually getting farther away from your destination the longer your trip goes on.
- Direction is relative. Many people were surprised that so many delegates had to travel south to arrive at this Northern Ontario gathering.

Northern Ontario delegates moved to the map of Ontario, and repeated the process of traveling from their community of origin to Manitoulin Island.

- What became evident, is that everyone traveling, at one time or other, has to go through one of five urban north communities – Sudbury, North Bay, Thunder Bay, Timmins, and/or Kenora.

Delegates moved indoors to the Hub Centre to an open conversation. The following comments are from the forum videotapes

“Traveling up here from Peterborough made me realize how the concentration of power in the Golden Horseshoe is a conscious infrastructure decision, and that little information exists for people within the horseshoe to realize what is beyond.”

“I think we are really lucky that we have good roads to get around Canada, and Northern Ontario, however, I think that people are intimidated by ‘new travel’. It’s so big, I think there is an initial intimidation, even to come to Manitoulin Island.”

“Living in Thunder Bay, what I am hearing from artists is that they would like to see more artists from other regions including Southern Ontario, take an interest in wanting to engage in the arts in Northern Ontario – that it isn’t always about Northern artists going to Southern Ontario to engage.”

A delegate from Hamilton and a delegate from Manitoulin Island commented that they both actually live on the same street – (Highway 6 runs through Hamilton, up the Bruce Peninsula, and across Manitoulin Island to Espanola.)

A delegate from Northwestern Ontario then noted that he lives on Yonge Street, the same one as in Toronto, which runs all the way to Fort Francis, meaning that he lives 'just off, off, off, Yonge Street!'.

Another delegate from Hamilton then mentioned that it is also significant that Highway 6 runs through Six Nations as well, and that perhaps there are logical connections to be rekindled along this historic 'Plank Road'.

A delegate from Manitoulin Island mentioned that at most economic development gatherings in Northern Ontario, the talk is about the two north south corridors of Hwy 11 and Hwy 400/69 – and rarely, if ever, the Hwy 6 corridor.

An artist from Moose Factor spoke about how he has less need to go south than before, and that he has put himself on YouTube and MySpace from his home. He also shared that he needs to be in his own 'home zone' in order to feel comfortable and inspired to create.

An artist from Summer Beaver (500 miles north of Thunder Bay) described his trip to Manitoulin Island, how many days it took, the variety of modes of transportation, etc. He also expressed how it felt inappropriate to be going home so soon.

A delegate from Ottawa spoke of the need to think about our 'ecological footprint' now when we travel – i.e. spend more time in places that are far to travel to.

A delegate from Manitoulin Island described how this consideration has changed the nature of touring in Northern Ontario over the last decade. It only makes sense, in all ways, to spend more time at the destination – particularly in remote travel. However, it was also pointed out that the standard practice for touring (and the criteria of the CC touring program) has been to maximize shows in the shortest number of days possible and move on. Examples were given of tour designs that included staying several days delivering workshops in the communities, but that these were turned down by the CC Touring fund committee because the tour was not 'financially feasible'. Clearly, there could be new ways of determining feasibility, especially now that we have concepts like 'ecological footprints'.

A delegate from Toronto described the trip to Manitoulin Island as an activity/adventure unto itself, as a group of seven people, not all of whom knew each other, spent the day getting to know each other and parts of the province at the same time. The delegate said the adventure of getting there made the destination all the sweeter.

A female delegate from Wikwemikong added that five weeks in a van with four guys and a bunch of gear touring through Northern Ontario could quickly diminish such romantic notions. It was added by a second delegate from Wikwemikong that they now often book meetings, hold discussions, plan projects, develop ideas, etc., while traveling, and plan how they will utilize this travel time resourcefully.

A guest artist from Vancouver described the travel experience from Toronto to Manitoulin Island with two other friends as an emotional, sensitizing, return to what is natural and beautiful. This was followed by one of the other passengers with a description of the trip north as a stripping away of all the 'protective layers' that she puts on in the city to feel safe.

A Franco-Ontarian delegate artist from Sudbury expressed that what makes a Northern Ontario artist a great Northern Ontario artist, is not how he/she plays guitar or how many rhymes they can remember in a four minute song, but rather, how they integrate and manage the demands of travel in Northern Ontario. He went on to describe how as a Franco-Ontarian band, they may have one performance in Thunder Bay, their next performance in Hearst two days away, as they try to connect their dispersed audiences, unlike for

example, their colleagues in Quebec. Northern Ontario artists are willing to drive the worst roads, in the worst conditions, in January, to get to their gigs. This is not the reality of most Canadian artists, particularly urban, who can reach audiences regularly and locally, and for whom such experiences are the exception and not the rule.

A delegate from Manitoulin Island described the challenges of meeting the requirements of the Canadian Theatre Agreement when touring in the north, which stipulates how long you can drive, the nature of accommodations, etc. These regulations designed to protect the artist, makes touring virtually impossible, and require many 'concessions' to the Canadian Theatre Agreement in order to receive contracts and permission. A system whereby an organization can only engage in its practice by endless 'concessions' to the rules is an ineffectual system or a system clearly designed to serve a different practice, or a different constituency.

A delegate from Atikokan described her extraordinary journey south along the North Shore of Lake Superior, several days of travel alone in a van. The beauty of the trip, and the energy she has felt since being on the Island, signifies an important message to remember – that while we spend most of our time, (and most often alone), putting out our energy and using up our personal resources in our jobs and running our programs, that we need to find the source of energy to replenish ourselves. This she feels is in coming together as Northerners who understand her reality. It recharges her batteries.

A delegate from Sudbury described the tendency of Northern Ontarians to compare, or measure against, or validate through, Southern Ontario standards or practices. She also remembered that in 1995 Debajehmujig, by its own admission, consciously stopped looking south for validation, literally turned its chairs around, and began to view itself and its mandate in relation to the communities of the north. This was a seminal moment in the organization coming to terms with its own identity and role.

A Franco Ontarian delegate from Sudbury described the single most constricting challenge to the growth of his artists and the dissemination of their art – is the cost of travel in Northern Ontario. It was also noted that prior to the now legendary arts funding cuts of the mid 1990's, we had the SNAP grant, or Supplementary Northern Assistance Program, delivered by the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines. This was easily accessible financial support for Northern Ontario arts organizations and artists specifically designated to offset travel costs, and to make the province smaller. This is exactly what is needed again, it was agreed by many that this should be a priority with funding the arts in Northern Ontario.

A delegate from Manitoulin Island spoke of how we need to promote the concept of 'equity based on outcomes' – that a truly equitable society will measure its success based on the equity of outcomes, not the equity of the process required to get there. In other words, it may be necessary to accept that certain segments of society require additional or different resources to get to the same destination.

A delegate from Northern Ontario raised the question of how often do we get together as Northerners to discuss our common aesthetic or commonalities in our practice as northerners. Is it important or useful for us to do so? If a jury of peers were from Northern Ontario, compared to a jury of peers from other regions looking at our applications, would there be a substantially different outcome, because of a different appreciation or understanding of the aesthetic or process?

A delegate from Sault Ste Marie expressed that while she felt it was important to see the development of programs and initiatives specifically designed to address the unique needs of Northern Ontario artists, that she felt it was equally important to see Northern Ontario artists sitting on the juries in Southern Ontario and other regions, as they are important educators in this capacity.

Another delegate from Northern Ontario stated that sitting on juries at the arts councils is one of the most effective professional development initiatives that an artist or arts administrator can participate in. This was echoed in agreement by many others.

A delegate from Toronto expressed her point of view that as northerners, we need to organize collectively so that our voice at councils and other places is heard – just like women needed to do in the past, just like the regions needed to do, just like the multi-cultural communities needed to do, just like labour needed to do, etc.

A delegate from North Bay commented that the need to organize collectively comes from a particular cultural perspective, and perhaps not the one that would work in Northern Ontario.

Breathing Northwinds in Story and Song

Several hundred people gathered Saturday evening in Manitowaning to hear the songs and stories of a dozen performing artists presented in four unique Northern Ontario venues, all walking distance from each other. Audiences designed their own evening program on one admission ticket – all musician breaks and sets were synchronized, and time was given for audiences to walk the few hundred steps to the next venue. This set-up created a wonderful atmosphere in the community, as was noted by the editor of the Island paper *The Manitoulin Expositor* in his editorial ***Multi-venue Entertainment in Manitowaning a Good Model***

Earlier on Saturday afternoon, all 24 performing artists and technicians spent time together setting up their venues, discussing how to approach different kinds of performance spaces and different kinds of audiences, sharing stories of being on the road in the north, and getting to know each other.

Performers included: Patty Cano, Jess Lee Cardinal, Nathan Cheechoo, Stephanie Fyfe, Gregory Hoskins (with Gary Craig), Esther Osche, Stef Paquette, Penthotal, Daniel Roy-McDonald, and Dwayne Trudeau.

Performing Artist Point of View (Excerpts from the Video Tapes)

"As for the performer in me, 600 plus shows and I've never performed in a church. I've never had a more unique venue. Damn it I apologize - I stripped in that church, I'm sorry. I just figured how many other times am I going to be able to play in a church, I better do something remarkable. But as a performer, the venue was just amazing. Probably the best venue I have ever played in my career. And as a businessman, (as Penthotal's manager) I thank you for giving a chance to a bunch of sixteen year olds to come and play. It was their first road trip, their first gig like this, and I know many people, many organizations, wouldn't have given them this opportunity."

"What I think I like most about the formulae for this weekend (as a performer) is that its not just another gig, you don't come in, do your show, and people go good good and your gone. It's got to be more than that, and this weekend was a real eye opener for me for that. There is so much more that can be going on, as we have seen here."

"I also really liked the venues, they were so cool. You had Burn's Wharf on the bay with the big steam ship right beside it. And the historic church with the tipi right beside it. And that everyone was here because they really wanted to be a part of it made even much better, there was no energy draining, no buzz kill, and everyone was willing to contribute to the whole event itself."

"We heard from some established artists what it has been like to be on the road in Northern Ontario, and we are proud of the young artists who are here now. But what is the promise for them? How will things be different? There has to be something more. We have to create something more for them, with them."

Sunday June 10, 2007

Breathing Northwinds Forum CLOSING CIRCLE

On Sunday morning after our group breakfast, we gathered for a final circle in the Hub Centre. Artistic Director of Debajehmujig Joe Osawabine explained the structure of the traditional governing circle, and ensured that all the women were seated together at the beginning of the circle, and next to them the men. As naturally follows, the women would speak first to express the needs of the community, and then the men would speak to make sure all the needs of the women were met. An integration of point of view and general consensus of everyone in the circle is a natural outcome.

Following are excerpts from the circle, transcribed from the videotapes.

"It was great for so many Sudbury people to get together and spend time together outside of their regular context, and really connect with each other, which we seldom do at home."

"Meeting all the wonderful people has drawn me back into the arts again."

"So exciting to have a conference that brings people of diverse backgrounds and disciplines together, hosted on a reserve by a Native Theatre Company, in Northern Ontario."

"This notion of sharing the food, whether we are dealing in provincial or national scopes, we have got to share the food, among and between all communities. What you have up here in Northern Ontario is so rich, so beautiful, so intrinsic, you have so much to share."

"What I realize is that we need this kind of sharing experience again and again in Atikokan, in North Bay, in Chapleau, etc. "

"I feel I have the next eight or nine months figured out from the contacts and ideas that I have made here, and I am anxious to pursue them."

"I wish someone from Contact Ontario had been able to attend, there is so much they would have learned, so much information and context."

"On behalf of CAO, I would like to thank Debajehmujig and this community for pulling out all the stops to make sure everyone was welcome and comfortable. There is a lot for us to learn simply from watching how this community works, and how your organization works with the community."

"I want to add to the voices that talk about how profound the experience of being here has been, and how it has been a whole body experience. And I think that the way of being, the way of connecting, the way of gathering around the table, the way in which the venues became a part of our experiences last night, the diversity in the community, and the hospitality which is so central to community arts ... all these things I think remind us that there are ways of doing things that we can all learn from here, things we can apply to our organizations and programs."

"I live in Toronto now but this is my home. It has been wonderful to come back, to fill myself up, so I can bring home back to my work in Toronto. This is how a geographic location becomes a resource simply because of its beauty and energy."

"Making it a no- tech gathering has allowed us to relax, to focus on making human connections instead of Internet connections."

"One idea might be to hold a gathering like this but design it so that entire families can attend – so the sense of community also runs through our own families, not just among colleagues or a certain aspect of the community."

"I wasn't sure what I was coming to, I am glad it was stressed to come for the entire weekend. I came thinking that this was the annual CAO forum, but it has been something much bigger than that, which is really excellent, there has been this crossover and contribution to a larger conversation."

"In the community I'm from (Birch Island), community art means that connection to the land, and being able to express that connection in all that we do, not just historically, but socially, spiritually, and human to human relationships. And that is what I found here this weekend. I found that connectivity, that one family – the concept that we carry is one earth, one mother, and one family. And that is very evident here. I hope that all of you can appreciate the land and what the land has to offer here. Often times we get so carried away on deciding what is it that we want to create or to express, when actually, if we tune into the earth, and the ground beneath us, its talking to us all the time. If we connect to one another and tune into each other, that same expression is going on. We are all sharing from the source. And so that is all I really have to say, I just like being, I like being in the moment and staying connected to my brothers and sisters, and to the land, and letting everything else take care of itself. I would really like to see all of us stay this way, get together, talk to each other about what concerns us, and how best to serve our communities that we are from."

"I'm from Manitoba, and there is an elder there, and she say that it's the artists and the storytellers and the poets that are leading the way, and that is definitely present this weekend."

"The creative process for me is a deeply personal thing, and I am looking forward to finding that point of ignition where that deeply personal thing that I am called to do meets the thing that you folks are trying to do, on an organizational level."

"As an isolated community member artist – not a lot of people listen to me, just the acknowledgment is really good, and I treat that with the highest respect."

"South is something different to me than it is to someone else, and that was a really important thing to learn here."

"There were a couple of things about this gathering that really impressed me, and that I am going to take back to the institution. One of the things that a (northerner) said that captured my attention, was he talked about finding a value based way of working, and I think this network is not just about professional needs, which will be met as you come together more often, but I think that more than just professional needs I think it is a network that bridges geography, space, and allows people to be in time, in a way that they are most comfortable with, and that I think is invaluable to the creation process. So the idea of a northern arts network, what I am happy about - what I loved about this gathering, is that it is being built upon values that are not going to divide people by using all the terms – emerging, mid career, senior – all the bureaucratic terms that we use when we fund people – but they are actually values that are coming out of peoples experiences and histories. So I think that is a huge accomplishment, and the recognition as a collective, you have actually collectively recognized that, and chosen to move forward to share that."

"I like the non-hierarchical aspect of the event, that we are all equal, we are all players in developing the arts in the north. I believe a lot of trust was built among people at this gathering."

"I am one of the people who have come way up north, to this gathering. I seldom go past Toronto, and this is my first time to Manitoulin Island. It has been a real delight, and comes back to the simplicity, and the art."

The art that we have seen and the artists that we have seen perform, the incredible amount of youth and talent involved, the simplicity and the new ideas. I look forward to seeing where this goes next."

"This gathering was inspirational on several levels. The Gulch, especially, really put me in touch with some passion for theatre that I have, that I have put aside for years, and I now want to do something about."

"Sometimes I feel like where I come from, that I'm probably the only person in the native community that's trying to jump start whatever the arts can do, and sometimes I need to come down here to the south (laugh) to find some of the answers to the questions I have for myself. For example, in my culture, in my language, we don't have a word for art, and I think I have finally answered my own questions about this, by listening to others talk about their experiences. And the questions started ten years ago, when Debaj's Best Medicine Troupe came up to our community to deliver training."

Excepts we did not include are the dozens of expressions of appreciation – for the food, for the warmth and hospitality of the communities, for the efforts of the organizers and volunteers, for the art and the performances, and for the beauty and generosity of spirit of the people of Manitoulin Island.

A closing thank-you and expression of appreciation was delivered by Ron Berti