

Access Report: The Theatre Centre

The Theatre Centre is a non-profit theatre arts organization that positions themselves as “more than a theatre” by prioritizing community and “pushing the boundaries of what is considered art” (website: about). The Theatre Centre strives to be a “community hub” with a café and space for community to gather beyond attending performances. Located in a Heritage building on West Queen West, The Theatre Centre produces performing arts and theatre shows, rents out their space to national and international theatre companies, and hosts community events including Community Meals and the Tuesday Making Club where creatives can gather and co-work in the café. They take pride in their efforts to build partnerships with community organizations and theatre companies. The Theatre Centre also runs an artist residency program which supports artists in creating new works over long periods of time. They provide space, mentorship and financial resources to do so. This work is then produced and shared by The Theatre Centre. The core values of the company include the concept of “reckless generosity” and the values of curiosity, humility and stewardship. The term “reckless generosity” comes from screenwriter Frank Cottrell Boyce and The Theatre Centre uses it to talk about sharing resources and creative innovation. This value informs their financial access initiatives which include free and lower cost tickets, community meals and their artist in residence program.

The Theatre Centre’s current approach to access, as articulated in their Vision, Mission and Strategic Plan, includes the keywords, concepts and phrases:

- *“Reckless generosity”*

- *Flexibility and hybridity*
- *Inventing the future*
- *Curiosity*
- *Community*
- *Humility*
- *Stewardship*

Their Strategic Plan does not use the term “accessibility” but commits to addressing structural inequity in the arts which affects marginalized artists. This includes dismantling “harmful structures and practices in the arts sector” through engaging in research, panels and discussions (Strategic Plan). They do not have a written access plan which mentions the Deaf, hard of hearing, mad, disability, and neurodivergent community. Their mission to be a welcoming and inviting “hub” for the community guides their general approach to access.

Access Practices, Tensions and Gaps at The Theatre Centre

Venue Accessibility: Access Practices

- The main entrance is down a ramp straight from Queen Street.
- There are barrier free washrooms on each floor.
- There is accessible seating in the front row. Technicians prepare the accessible seating when reserved.
- Visitors are encouraged to call and discuss any access needs they have. The Theatre Centre will work to accommodate them. For example, guiding a visitor through the emergency exit to avoid crowds at the front entrance.
- Accessible large sized seats can be provided upon request and are taken out from storage, but are limited.
- There is an old elevator used to access the second floor of the theatre which is operated by staff using a key. Visitors must ask to use the elevator.
- Many staff members are trained to use the elevator and there are always two staff members at the Box Office to ensure someone can operate the elevator. A QR code beside the lift provides further instructions for staff.
- There is a second elevator to access the upstairs patio. A button is used to alert the Box Office who sends someone to operate the elevator.

Venue Accessibility: Access Tensions and Gaps

- There is a lack of clarity regarding what kinds of accommodations (beyond the elevator and washrooms) are available via the website.
- The elevator is key-operated and therefore cannot be used by visitors on their own. The Theatre Centre cannot renovate the elevator because they operate out of a Heritage building.
- If the elevator breaks, repairs go through the city of Toronto. There is only one elevator to access the second floor. This has resulted in elevator use being encouraged only when it *appears to be mandatory* by staff as to avoid it being out-of-service.
- There is limited availability for larger sized seats.
- The second floor washroom's accessibility button is currently broken. Staff assist when requested.
- An accessible wraparound service was suggested by the The Disability Collective during an accessibility audit and it was noted that front of house staff may not be equipped to assist Deaf patrons.
- Lack of access signage for the building that incorporates braille and describes where the lift and accessible door "push" buttons are.
- The address sign is difficult to read. Could be in large letters on the front and side of the building and the beginning/end of the ramp.

- Lack of signage to show where Wheel Trans should stop to pick up and drop off passengers.
- A sturdy railing would be beneficial for all staircases, especially to access the front row.
- There is no accessible map for blind or partially sighted visitors.
- It was raised in the focus group that many theatres generally do not have an accessible back of house. Ensure that the back of house is accessible for performers and staff with access needs or mobility devices.

Performances: Access Practices

- ASL has been provided in the past however it is not standard practice.
- They do not consistently offer relaxed performances but they have occurred in the past.
- Content warnings have been used for some performances.

Performances: Access Tensions and Gaps

- Because ASL is not mandatory and is not included in the access budget, in the past volunteers have been recruited to provide ASL and ASL interpreters have agreed to work for a lower rate.

- A “quiet area” for neurodivergent visitors that can be accessed during events and performances could provide more access for visitors who are neurodivergent or who have sensory needs.
- Relaxed performances are inconsistently offered.
- Content warnings are inconsistently offered.
- Access practices that move beyond physical access are considered an option rather than integral to performances and events.
- A lack of mask-mandatory performances.

Purchasing Tickets: Access Practices

- Tickets are available for purchase on the website and can be delivered via email or will call.
- Visitors can purchase accessible seating online which reserves ground level seating or space for a mobility device. Visitors can make note of further access requests if they wish to.
- After purchasing an accessible seating ticket, the Box Office will follow up to discuss access measures with the ticket-holder.
- There is information about how to access the building by transit on the website.
- Free or 50 percent discounted tickets are available upon request at the Box Office or via phone or email with no questions asked. Strictly for programs

presented or prosecuted by The Theatre Centre. Approximately 10 percent of tickets are reserved for this option. Limited to 2 per person per performance.

- A pay-it-forward option is available for purchase and helps to financially support the free and discounted ticket program.
- If anyone wants to book a ticket for a sold out show, they are added to a community member list and informed if there is a ticket through pay-it-forward available for another show.
- A wait-list is available if free and discounted tickets are sold out.
- Ticket promotion in the cafe with the coffee card program: purchase five coffees get one free coffee & purchase ten coffees get one free ticket.

Purchasing Tickets: Access Tensions and Gaps

- Since not all shows are available for free or discounted tickets, it may be helpful to make a clear note of which shows are eligible. For example, make text such as, “free or discounted tickets available for this show for community members who require them” visible in advertising and marketing materials.

HR, Work Accommodations and Hiring Policy: Access Practices

- AODA training is encouraged but not required for staff.
- At minimum two people work together at night to ensure the safety of staff.

- Flexibility with breaks.
- Workload accommodations can be discussed with team members and leadership in a casual way.
- Some flexibility with hours worked during busy and quieter seasons by collecting lieu time if staff wishes. During busy times many staff pick up extra hours because the workload is higher and more demanding.
- Opportunities to work occasionally from home during off-peak periods.
- The staff orientation checklist asks about access needs or preferred communication during the onboarding process.
- The channel for accommodation requests is informal (via Slack).

HR, Work Accommodations and Hiring Policy: Access Tensions and Gaps

- AODA training is encouraged but not required for staff.
- Due to the nature of non-profit theatre work, peak season may be more demanding than off-peak periods.
- It can be difficult to take a day off when it is a busy season because the workload increases for all team members. Flexibility can also mean additional workload.
- A lack of official written access or accommodation policy for staff.
- It is not clear what accommodations are available to staff. Staff must request accommodations without knowing what accommodations might be offered.

- The channel for accommodation requests is informal (via Slack).

Community Feedback: Access Practices

- The Box Office has a complaint channel which can be accessed through email and phone. The Audience Experience Manager is the first point of contact to receive complaints or feedback.
- The Theatre Centre conducted an Access Audit through the Disability Arts Collective in 2025. The audit consisted of an access checklist for the Comedy is Art festival, checklists for the venue, website, events, and for different disability communities. It also provided access recommendations.

Community Feedback: Access Tensions and Gaps

- A lack of follow through with Access Audit recommendations.

Graphic Design and Communications: Access Practices

- Accessible design practices have been implemented by staff with previous experience with access initiatives. These include: the use of plain language, word economy, image descriptions, alt text, and accessible graphic design and font.
- Everything posted to social media includes alt text and a description in the caption.

- The newsletter was moved to a platform that offers screen reader accessibility and alt text function.
- Image descriptions have been integrated into the newsletter.
- The website has image descriptions incorporated into metadata, descriptions in captions, and alt text.

Graphic Design and Communications: Access Tensions and Gaps

- Lack of documents or list of sources that inform written, design, digital and web accessibility for all staff members to access as needed.

General Recommendations

- Develop a written access policy that incorporates broader accessibility measures and that can be delivered consistently across all performances.
- Make the access policy available to the public (ie: website, Box Office, entrance).
- Integrate and secure funding (and/or fundraise) for an access budget that is included in overall operating costs rather than working with individual budgets per project. Implement broader access practices (for staff and visitors) and offer them on a consistent basis.
- Deepen understanding of the difference between access as “integration” vs a creative, invitational and capacious practice. Communicate this to staff.

- Consider making relaxed performance dates mandatory.
- Consider making content warnings mandatory (when needed) for all performances.
- Consider hosting mask-mandatory performances and investing in air filtration systems.
- Create an internal access text for staff which lists available access practices and how staff can request accommodations.
- Prioritize disability representation in programming.
- Prioritize working with disabled artists.
- Provide ASL options.
- Consider learning more about audio-described performance.
- Consider creating an Access Coordinator or an access doula role. Someone who works with the budgeting team when planning the upcoming season, reviews access measures of the past and suggests future practices based on current trends and previous accessibility audits and reports.
- Require rentals to adhere to the access policy and create an onboarding document for accessibility that can be shared with rentals and artists in residence.
- Review The Disability Collective's Access Audit during a team meeting. Create channels for feedback.

- Implement regular team meetings to discuss access tensions, visitor feedback and to review tools for providing access.
- Build genuine relationships with diverse Deaf, hard of hearing, mad, neurodivergent, and disability communities that can provide ongoing feedback.
- Consider microphones for audio legibility.

Recommended areas of focus for Access Activations

- Develop a written access plan that incorporates broader accessibility measures and that can be delivered consistently across all performances.
- Rewrite the value statement to integrate disability justice and critical access into its text.
- Write an accessibility statement for patrons and audience members.
- Training materials for residential artists or rental artists (step-by-step guides on how to implement access and why it is important for artists to integrate access into their artwork).