

*What is FemFest called to be
in these times?*

Reflecting Back and Imagining Forward

**A community consultation commissioned by Sarasvati Productions
Facilitated by Cate Friesen, The Story Source**

Executive Summary

Submitted: June 18, 2018



Context:

FemFest was started in 2003 after statistics continued to show that less than 30% of plays on Canadian stages were written by women. Since Sarasvati Productions' mandate is to use theatre for social change, this was an important area of representation the company wanted to address.

It started with very small productions. Then grew to include touring shows being brought to Winnipeg, full productions, and a cabaret with female artists from multiple disciplines. We have tried all kinds of things within the festival structure.

Our vision is equity in theatre. FemFest has three major goals: to provide showcasing opportunities for a broad range of women theatre artists, women playwrights in particular, in order to address the disparity of women theatre artists in Canada; to provide opportunities to emerging artists; and to provide a forum for the exploration of issues of importance to women. FemFest attempts to act as a launching pad for theatre artists, as well as an opportunity to work with community groups to address societal issues.

After 15 years it is time to look at what the festival needs to be moving forward. Although the stats for Canadian theatre haven't reached equity, the notion of gender has changed. We want your help in looking forward at this time so we can be responsive to how the community has changed. We want to be more inclusive, reflect the reality of more fluid interpretations of gender and content, establish new partnerships and open the festival up to new patrons. Our goal is to hear from those who have never attended, those who have, those who sometimes do, organizations with related mandates, artists and patrons.

- Hope McIntyre, Artistic Director, Sarasvati Productions

Process:

This community consultation focused on animating conversations that brought out discovery and diversity of ideas, through a live event and survey. Following, the board and artistic director session focused on discerning themes, finding connections, and beginning to consider possible actions. The final step introduces new information and insights back into the system - through planning and evaluating FemFest and reporting back to the community.

The forum was held on Wednesday, April 11th, 2018 from 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm at the University of Winnipeg. 91 invitations for the forum were sent out and 31 participants attended, representing 24 diverse community organizations. Some of the participants had been to FemFest, and some had never been.

The forum was planned in a way that inspired reflection and imagining of the future, with the maximum of input from attendees. It included a display of 15 years of FemFest posters/brochures; an introduction and overview of FemFest by artistic director Hope McIntyre; and a 'world cafe' style process that generated a wide range of ideas and perspectives. The energy in the room was very positive!

There was also a really great response to the survey. 122 people took the time to answer our questions.

On May 30, 2018, Sarasvati board members and the A.D., lead by Cate Friesen, worked with the 'harvest' of ideas, looking for important themes, choosing strengths to leverage and barriers to lower, and beginning to connect these with possible actions, and potential partnerships.

All board members and A.D. were asked to prioritize the intentional and powerful questions that can be fed back into the planning and evaluation of FemFest moving forward.

This report, with recommendations, intentional and powerful questions, and lots of feedback from Sarasvati's community, can now be fed back into the planning of FemFest over the next 3-5 years. In addition to utilizing the report to plan FemFest, the organization can keep the work alive by feeding it forward to the community.

It has been a privilege and a joy to work with Sarasvati Productions, an organization that offers up vital stories and grows our community.

- Cate Friesen, The Story Source

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Six recommendations for FemFest moving forward

RECOMMENDATION 1: Ask four core questions while planning FemFest and when evaluating FemFest.

Participants of the community consultation were asked to respond to this: “What question, if asked right now, could spark Femfest moving forward?” The generated questions were prioritized by board and the artistic director and synthesized by the consultant.

There is a clear cycle outlined here: Spark interest, Make Space, Reflect Voices, Promote (evaluate, repeat!)

FOR PLANNING:

- How can we **spark interest** in communities that are not our typical/general demographic?
- How can we connect with and **make space** for feminist artists of colour, newcomers, Indigenous people, refugees, and gender non-conforming/ genderqueer/ non-binary communities?
- How can our **content reflect** the voices of our diverse communities and expand beyond the comfort zones of our existing collective and regular audience?
- How can we **promote** FemFest to brand new audiences?

FOR EVALUATION:

- How have we **sparked interest** in communities that are not our typical/general demographic?
- How have we connected with and **made space** for feminist artists of colour, newcomers, Indigenous people, refugees, and gender non-conforming/ genderqueer/ non-binary communities.
- How has our **content reflected** the voices of our diverse communities and expanded beyond the comfort zones of our existing collective and regular audience?
- How have we **promoted** FemFest to brand new audiences?

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RECOMMENDATION 2: Hold on to the strengths that were identified by the community as core to FemFest.

The forum participants and the survey respondents were asked, “What makes FemFest shine?”

The responses are summarized in the following list. While reaching out to a wider audience with the intention of growing FemFest, these need to remain core.

- Tell stories other venues don't tell, related to inclusivity for female experience, diversity, and gender. (Style and content)
- Tell stories in a way that others don't tell them (Written by women)
- Provide opportunities for women playwrights and for local artists whose work would never be available to be seen if not for FemFest. (Opportunities for emerging artists)
- Connect to to diverse groups in the community whose points of view/interests/concern might otherwise not be represented. (Diversity)
- Maintain a warm welcoming atmosphere.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Use the questions to focus FemFest planning. Draw on the ideas and perspectives generated by this consultation to discern, as a board and staff, what can be taken on each year.

This starts by building on the work done at the board meeting on May 30, 2018, where priorities were made and possible partnerships identified. There are a lot of ideas in the report and the supporting documents. The organization cannot move on all things, nor will be tackle everything this year.

Even though the planning for FemFest 2018 is well underway, the consultant recommends identifying and taking action on at least one small step for each of the four questions.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Embrace the title FemFest as a known brand. Work to find a new, more inclusive tagline.

Title: Both the community consultation and the survey echoed the same message:

- Keep FemFest – it was created for women/feminism. Don't change that.
- FemFest is big enough to encompass and hold a variety of expressions
- Name recognition is important.
- Earned it, claim it.

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Tagline: While there were those who thought the tagline should remain, many others expressed concern that it reflect a more “contemporary notion of inclusivity re: gender” -- including in those who identify as non-binary and transgender. This came up in many of the discussions, not just those pertaining to the name and tagline. The language is evolving and FemFest needs to reflect this.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Harness the energy of the community, through connection and intentional partnerships.

In the act of inviting organizations and individuals to offer up their ideas and perspectives, Sarasvati has sparked considerable interest and excitement about FemFest.

Quite a few in the room during the community consultation told the consultant they had never been to FemFest but were excited to be involved. This is a great time to act on partnerships.

Developing partnerships can take time but they can also begin as more informal connections or one-off collaborations. The board began some excellent initial work linking up bright ideas with possible partnerships.

Moving forward, use the lens of the four questions to decide which partnerships to pursue.

RECOMMENDATION 6: Keep the work alive by feeding it forward to the community.

The consultant recommends that the community is invited to a ‘report back’ session before or after one of the FemFest 2018 shows and that this becomes a practice each year. This year that would include a summary of the community consultation, and an invitation to answer the four questions at its core.

Secondly, the report and the ideas for an ongoing process based on the report could be presented and/or discussed at a relevant theatre or community conference. This could spark further ideas or partnerships, and invite other valuable ideas or support.