

POSTMARGINAL

EDMONTON RETREAT

WESTBURY THEATRE
SEPT. 12 TO 14, 2021

WHAT IS A POSTMARGINAL RETREAT?

The Postmarginal project, initiated in 2017 in Toronto, has three streams of activities: context events, practical research, and retreats. The retreats help theatre communities to navigate discussions around representation, identity politics, and EDI (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion). It is a living exploration of the intersection between dialogue, movement and practice that examines how inclusiveness can inspire new artistic possibilities.



“Postmarginal values where we come from and the communities that make us strong. We embrace the creative inspiration that emerges from our differences, which are part of our multifaceted identity as human beings and artists. We aim to nurture theatre and performance that recognizes cultural backgrounds, speech accents, physical/mental differences, and gender identities as intrinsic components of creation. Our main goal is to actively, productively, and creatively explore new theatrical forms and vocabularies along with the work ethics and rehearsal strategies that facilitate them.”

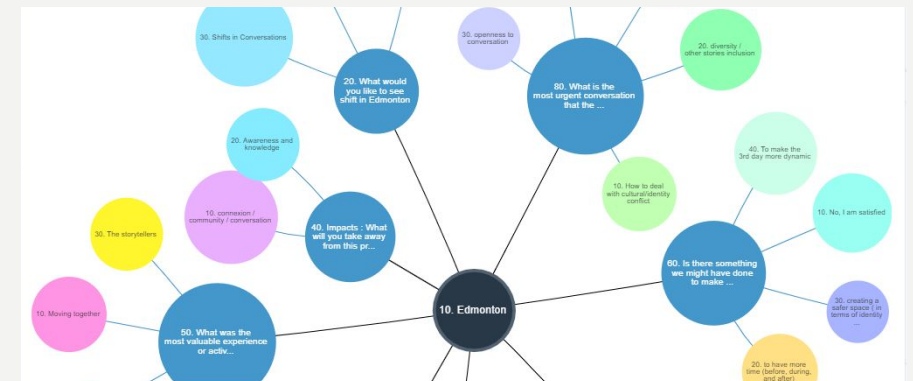
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Postmarginal Edmonton was a three-day theatre retreat organized by Postmarginal and Walterdale Theatre's Equity Committee. It was developed with the participation of local theatre artists and the financial support of the Edmonton Arts Council and the Edmonton Community Foundation, with the collaboration of partners Theatre Alberta and the Citadel Theatre.

Over the three days, many questions, comments, and discussions were documented on a 'harvest wall' to give participants a view of the progress. As well, sound recordings were made throughout the event of the discussions and workshops. This written and audio material was transcribed and the data was processed by a professional researcher to create [this qualitative analysis of the retreat](#).

WORKING METHODS

We reviewed the written and audio material and identified recurring themes. We then created categories based on these themes and sorted the participants' responses into these categories. The percentages represent the number of responses that fit into each selected category as a portion of the total responses received.

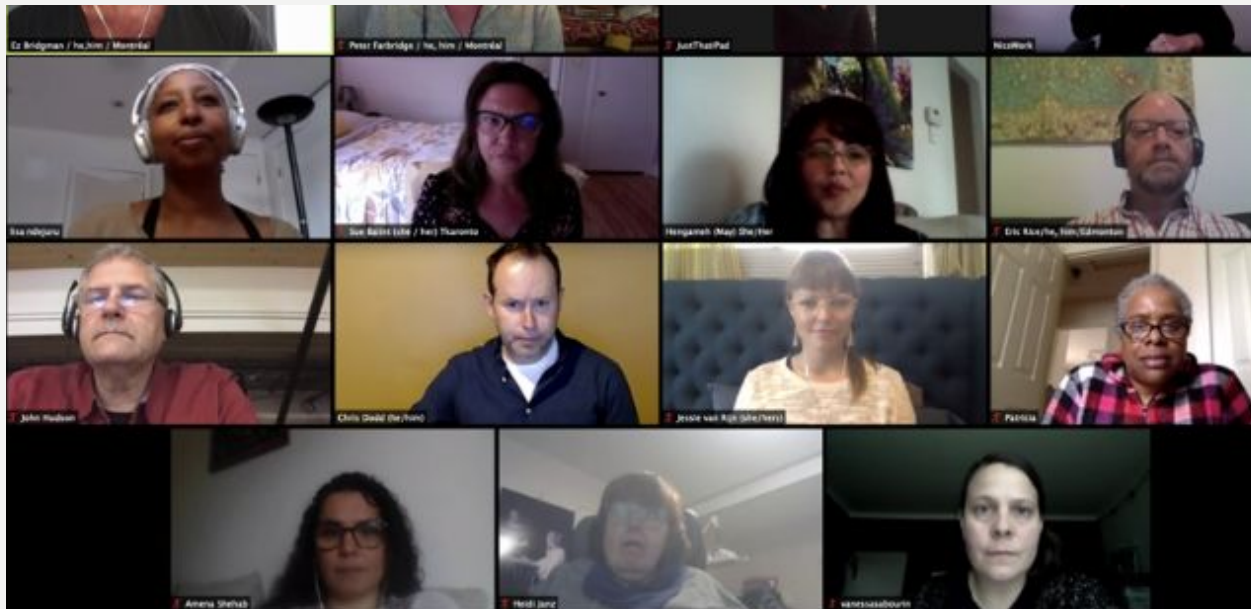


Coding Tree Extract

POSTMARGINAL IN EDMONTON

Postmarginal designed the event with input from a series of meetings with Edmonton 'community consultants. In July 2020, fifteen people were consulted in three meetings to define the central question of the event:

“How do we recognize and activate the beauty and value of difference?”



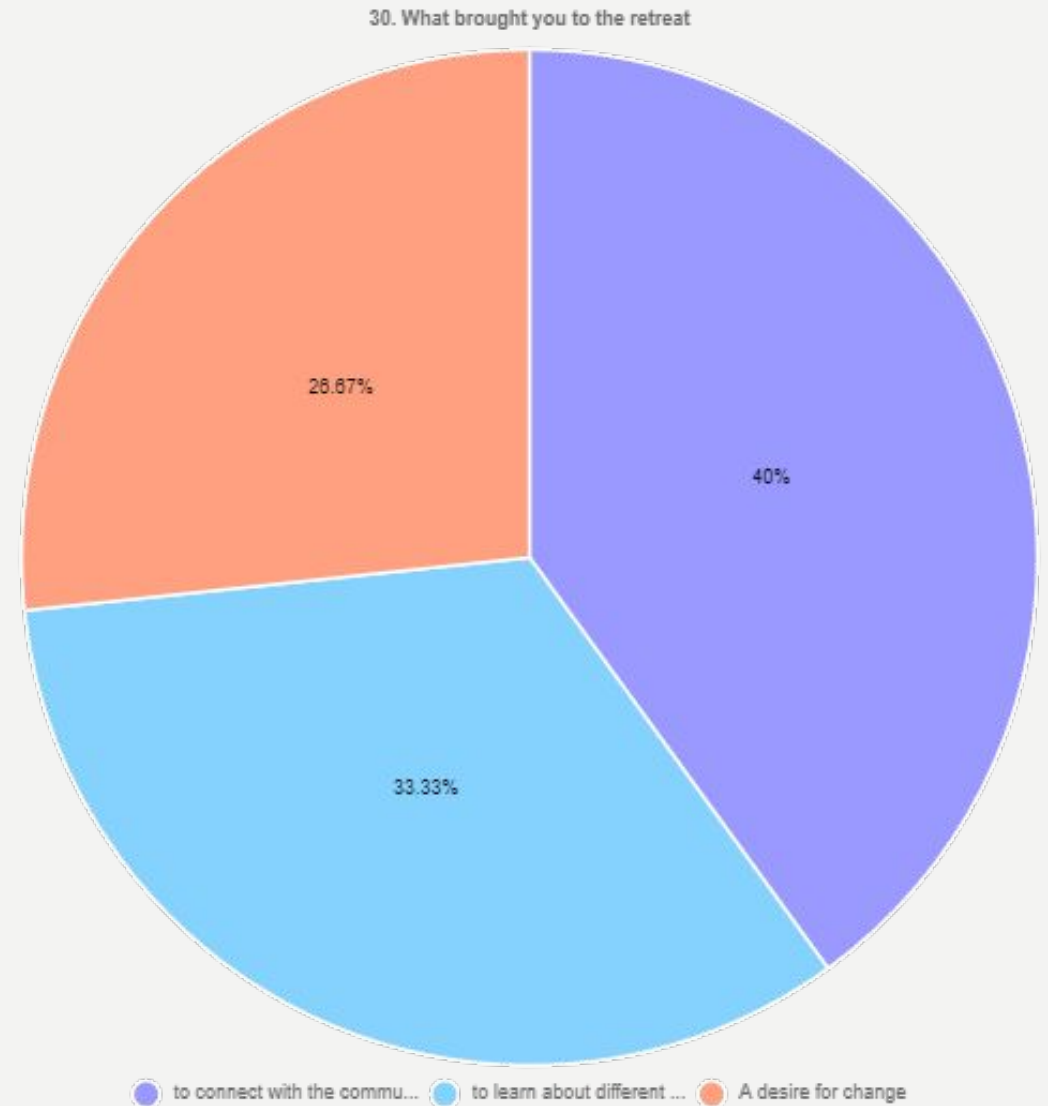
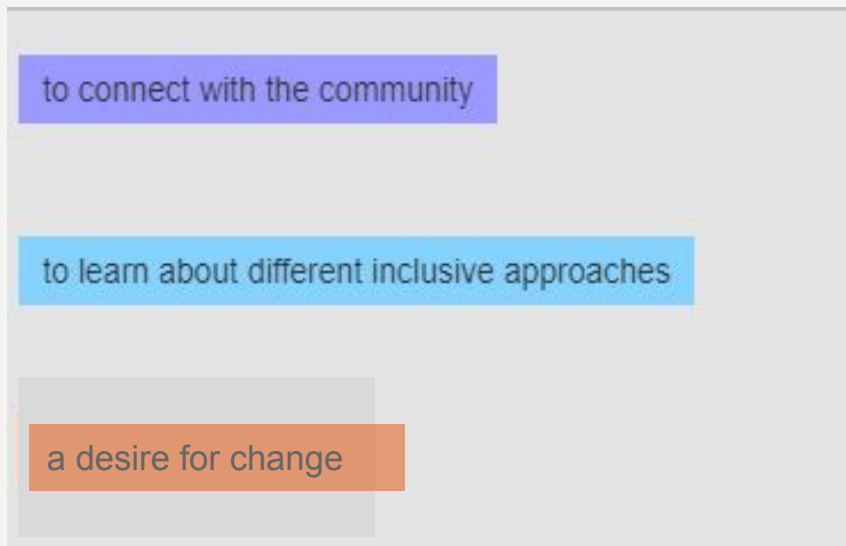
Community Consultants Engaged in the Planning Process

Jordan Champion, Patricia Darbasie, David Owen, Chris Dodd, Sue Goberdhan, Darrin Hagen, John Hudson, Heidi Janz, May Kharaghani, Brooke Leifso, Keri Mitchell, Mũkonzi wa Mũsyoki, Monica Roberts, Vanessa Sabourin, Amena Shehab, and Jessie van Rijn

PARTICIPANTS

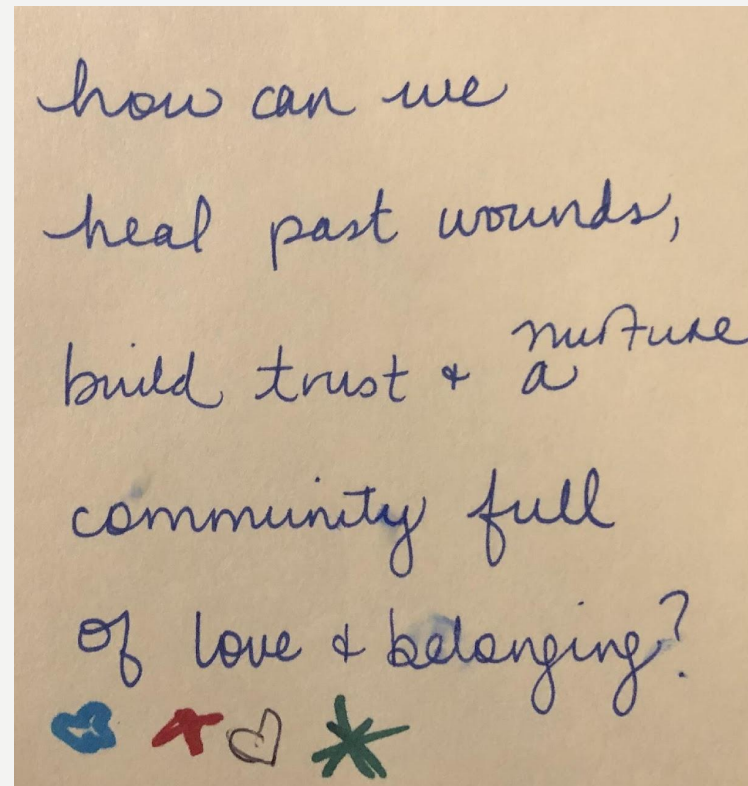
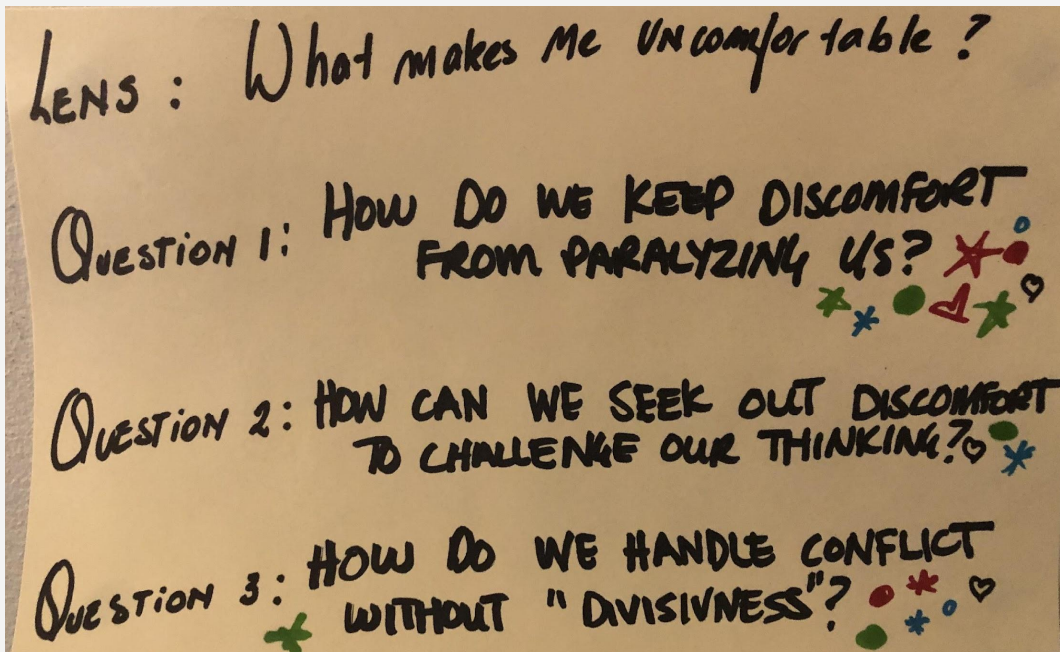
Every attempt was made to ensure balanced representation in the attendees. Attendance was determined by an open registration process. One weakness in the cohort was a low representation of 'gatekeepers' (i.e., those individuals who hold the most power in the Edmonton community).

What brought you to the retreat?



DAY 1: "A SPACE TO GIVE AND RECEIVE"

Eight stories gave participants a sense of the challenges faced by different marginalized communities (Indigenous, Persons of Colour, LGBTQ2S+, disabled, d/Deaf), and how these artists were travelling beyond their barriers. As they listened to these stories with 'lenses' -- beauty, fear, What touches me?, What makes me uncomfortable? -- participants were asked to generate questions specific to the Edmonton theatre community.



Storytellers :
Chris Dodd
Jesse Del Fierro
David Horak
Todd Houseman
Josh Languedoc
Brooke Leifso
Mũkonzi wa Mũsyoki
Shrina Patel
Lady Vanessa

"I loved the local storytellers and using our listening lens that helped guide the reflection and conversation."

Lucy Lu

DAY 2 : “EMBRACING THE COMPLEXITY”

It began in the morning with two practical theatre workshops in somatics and rehearsal techniques. The first explored the physical sensations of empathizing with differences and the second presented a creation method of working across cultural differences (in this case, language). In the afternoon, the participants voted on the most important of the questions to create their own discussion groups that could go deeper into the issues facing the community in terms of equity and inclusion.



“My favourite part of the workshop, however (not mutually exclusive to the conversations, but intrinsically connected), was the amount of time we spent moving together. I found it very important to both be able to speak honestly to one another, about difficult subject matter, and then to move together through space and develop moments of unanimous and private experience. It really was important for me to move with everyone and to work together collectively, especially without words at times.” Hengameh (May) Kharaghani

DAY 3 : “FORWARD INTO ACTION”

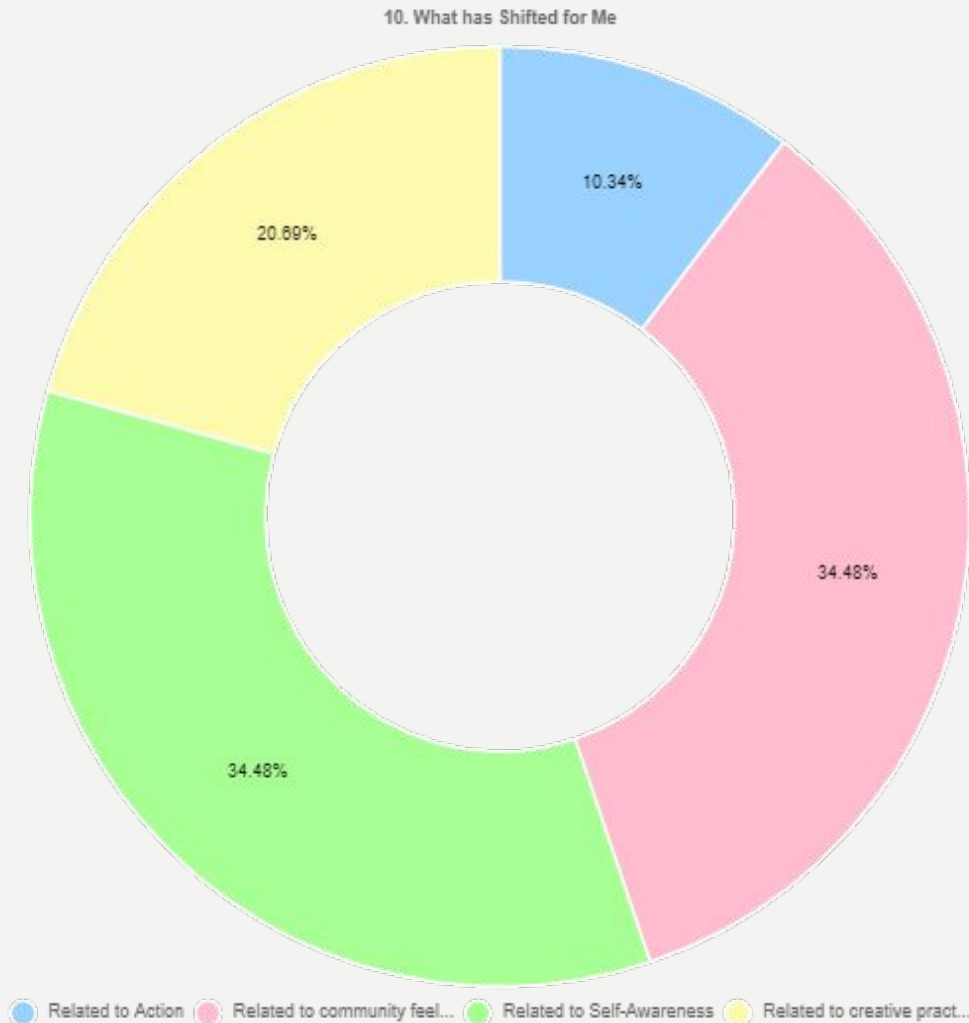
Participants were invited to [propose and sketch out ideas for projects in Edmonton](#) that could address these issues. One of the projects that emerged was a new theatre company that could explore multilingual drama through the intersection of verbal and non-verbal disciplines. Two questions were asked: What has shifted for me? What would you like to see shift in Edmonton?



“The biggest thing that I took away from the workshop, is the importance of placing initiative (ex: to diversify Edmonton's theatre landscape, to decolonize theatre practices) before the fear of saying the wrong thing. I am guilty of becoming very stuck in my head, afraid of over-stepping, or mis-representing a person or an idea or a story, that so often in the past | have chosen to say nothing. What the workshop reinforced for me, was the notion that I cannot control how my intentions impact another person. I would rather be brave with a good intention, and own the making of mistakes, rather than sit quietly and disregard my responsibilities as an ally. I cannot claim to be an ally if I am silent, and I cannot claim to be an ally if I am too afraid of making a mistake, to make progress.”

Alexandra Dawkins

DAY 3 : WHAT HAS SHIFTED FOR ME?



Related to Self-Awareness

- “My energy level has shifted. I am far more energized than I was before taking part in Postmarginal.”
- “I can find love in others, even when I am overwhelmed.”
- “My fear has shifted. My energy has shifted. My cynicism has shifted.”

Related to community feeling

- “See and knowing that I am allowed to take a long break, and everyone will be here when I’m ready.”
- “Collaboration is a process of coming together and moving apart space and share space.”
- “I have more connection, communication, recognition of each other between the professional community circles.”

Related to creative practice

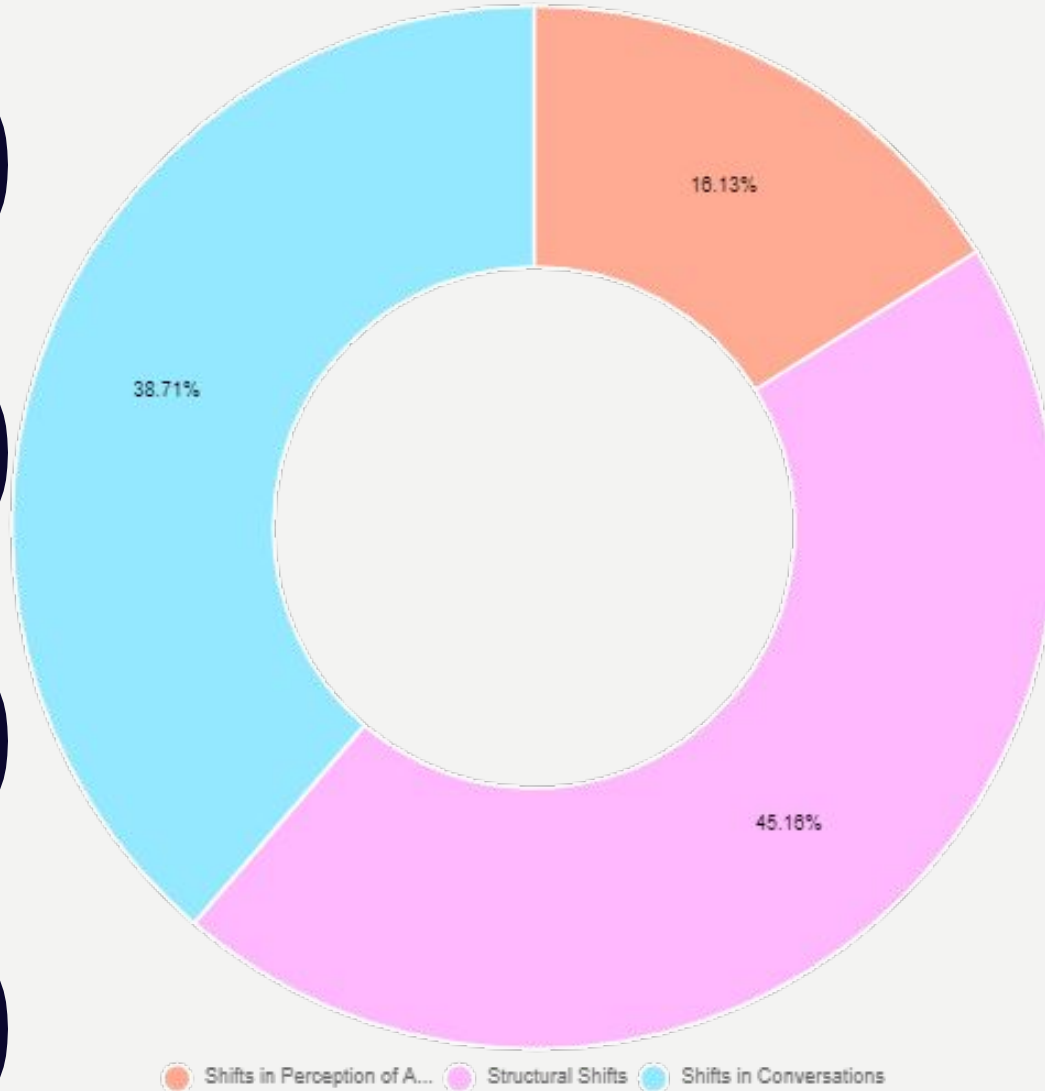
- “Decisiveness. Confidence to explore when I was unsure if I had the tools.”

Related to action

- “[I started] thinking in terms of reality as opposed to abstract in terms of action”

DAY 3 : WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE SHIFT IN EDMONTON?

20. What would you like to see shift in Edmonton



Structural Shifts

- “More spontaneous, non-precious dance experiences that include pro, non-pro, dance lovers of all abilities and backgrounds”
- “An understanding of the importance of Arts and culture to the fabric of the community”
- “More cost-effective rehearsal space, more funding and support for diverse and experimental work, a deeper sense of collective support and encouragement, multicultural work and mentorship.”

Shifts in Conversations

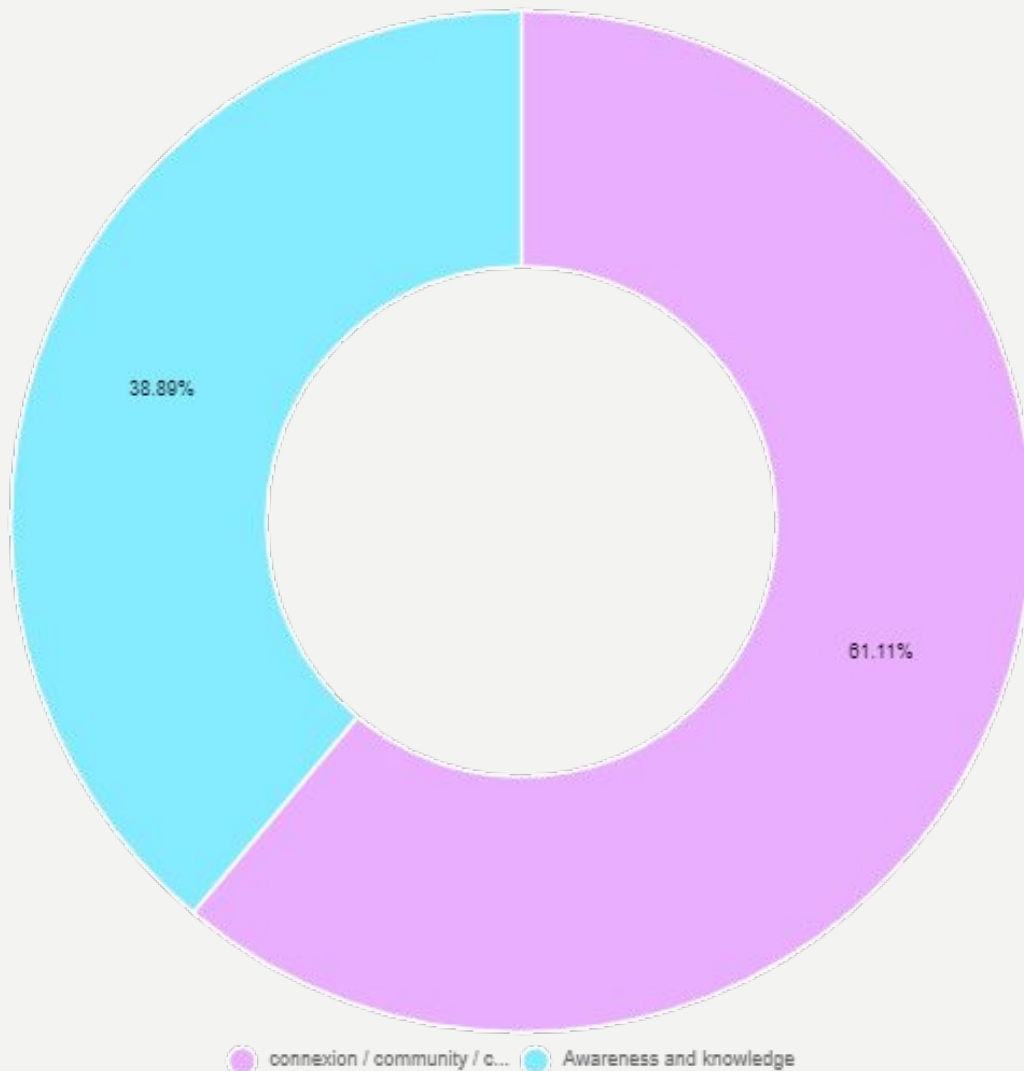
- “That we speak to one another about our work, the common themes, frustrations and find a way to express art to the established theatres.”
- “That this work continues: the meetings, the conversations, the existence of new work in existing and perhaps new spaces.”

Shifts in Perceptions of Art

- “I would like to see acceptance of different voices and performance styles in Edmonton”

SURVEY : WHAT WILL YOU TAKE AWAY FROM THIS PROGRAM

40. Impacts : What will you take away from this program?



connexion / community / conversation

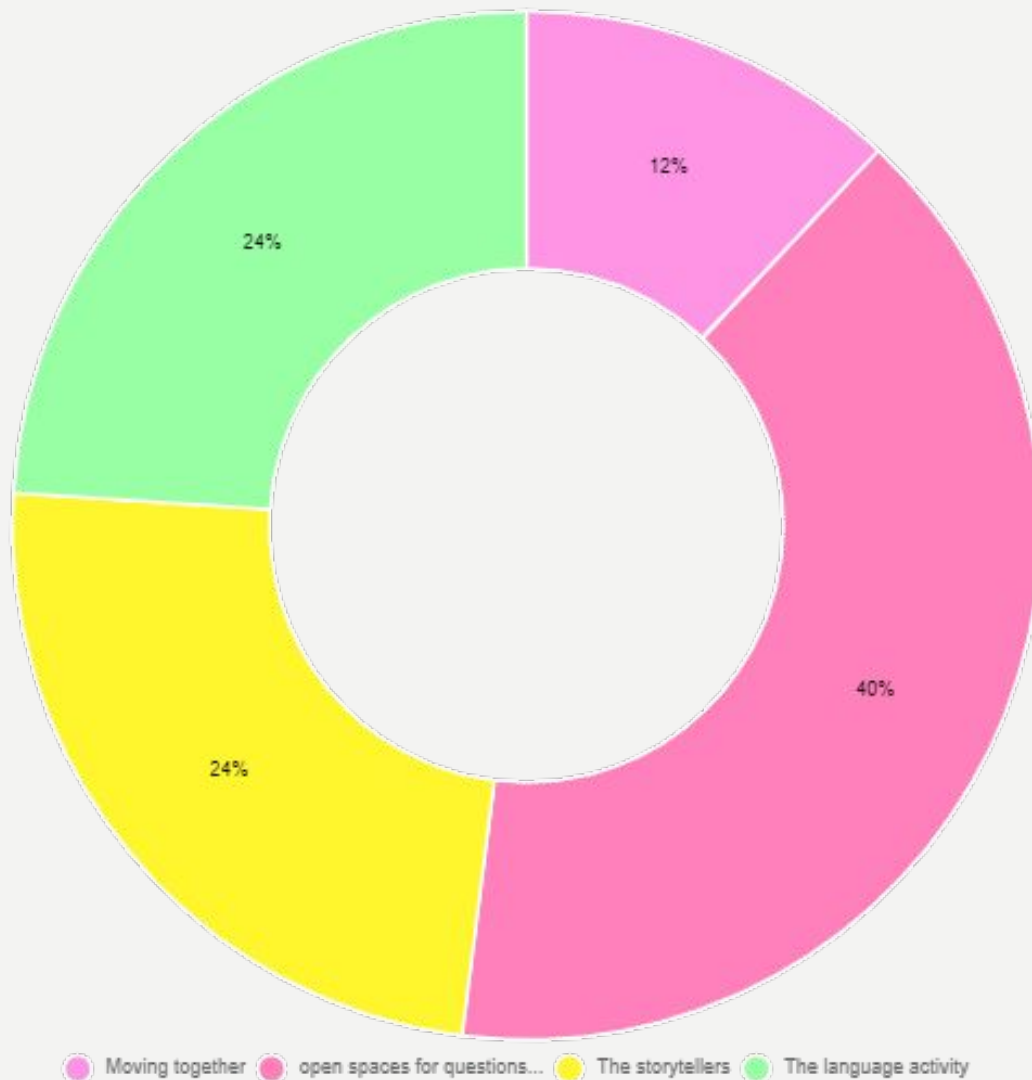
- “It was valuable to be in a space of Edmonton theatre artists coming together from both the community-engaged and professional worlds. I don't feel we took full advantage of this rare occasion in our theatre community. We should continue to meet and interact and build upon this going forward. I think there is a lot to learn from each other yet and this very easily could be a one-off and that would be an unfortunate loss for our community.”
- “I am definitely taking away the sense of community. It is such a good reminder that there are always new folks to meet, and future collaborators to be excited about working with. Our shared vision of the future is a strength that we share and I'm not alone in thinking there can be a better way of creating than the colonial model.”

Awareness and knowledge

- “I think this project really opened me ears to the ways that theatre in Edmonton is changing, and to ways of facilitating difficult conversations.”
- “I think one thing that I'm taking away is that most people feel outside of the theatre community in one way or another...and that's really unacceptable. I need to reach out more.”
- “How siloed artists are in their work. How we don't speak to one another about our experiences. How we sacrifice our own well being to work - unnecessarily.”

SURVEY WHAT WAS THE MOST VALUABLE EXPERIENCE OR ACTIVITY?

50. What was the most valuable experience or activity?



open spaces for questions and conversations

- “Experiencing the facilitation of difficult conversations (the method)”
- “The conversations about decolonizing and Indigenizing theatre in Edmonton (including university theatre)”
- “Having the conversations around the space based on the questions we asked. It was a great way to connect with people and share ideas in a comfortable space.”

The storytellers

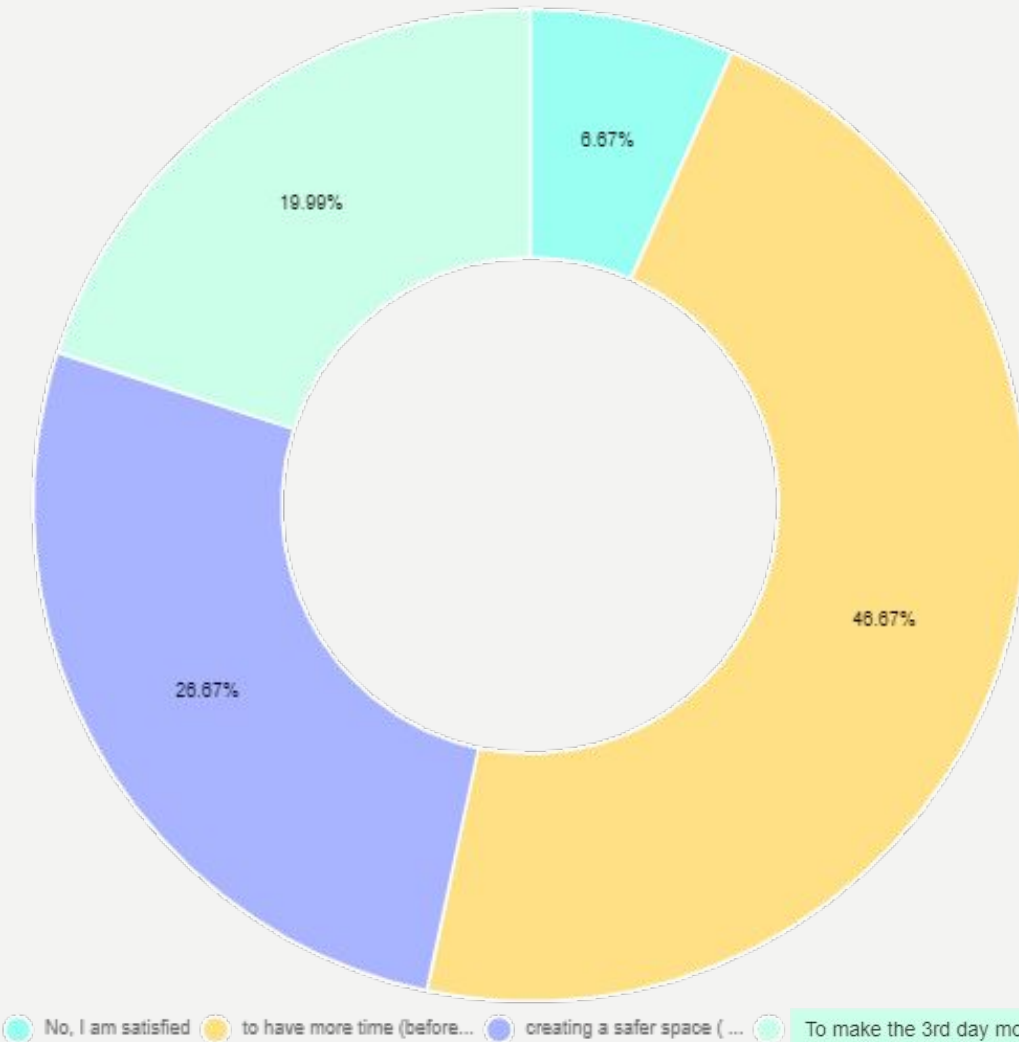
- “Listening to the story-tellers. They were very sincere.”
- “loved the local story tellers and using our listening lens that helped guide the reflection and conversation.”

The language activity

- “Art's session and thinking about working cross-lingually and how that creates a space for relationships to be built amongst audience members that is actually kind of beyond what we can facilitate alone as actors/directors/producers. Brilliant.”
- “I really loved the language activity, I was very inspired as an instructor to help my students use their language and culture in their work more, rather than have them shape their expression into what I think is best.”

SURVEY : IS THERE SOMETHING WE MIGHT HAVE DONE TO MAKE YOUR EXPERIENCE BETTER?

60. Is there something we might have done to make your experience better?



to have more time (before, during, and after)

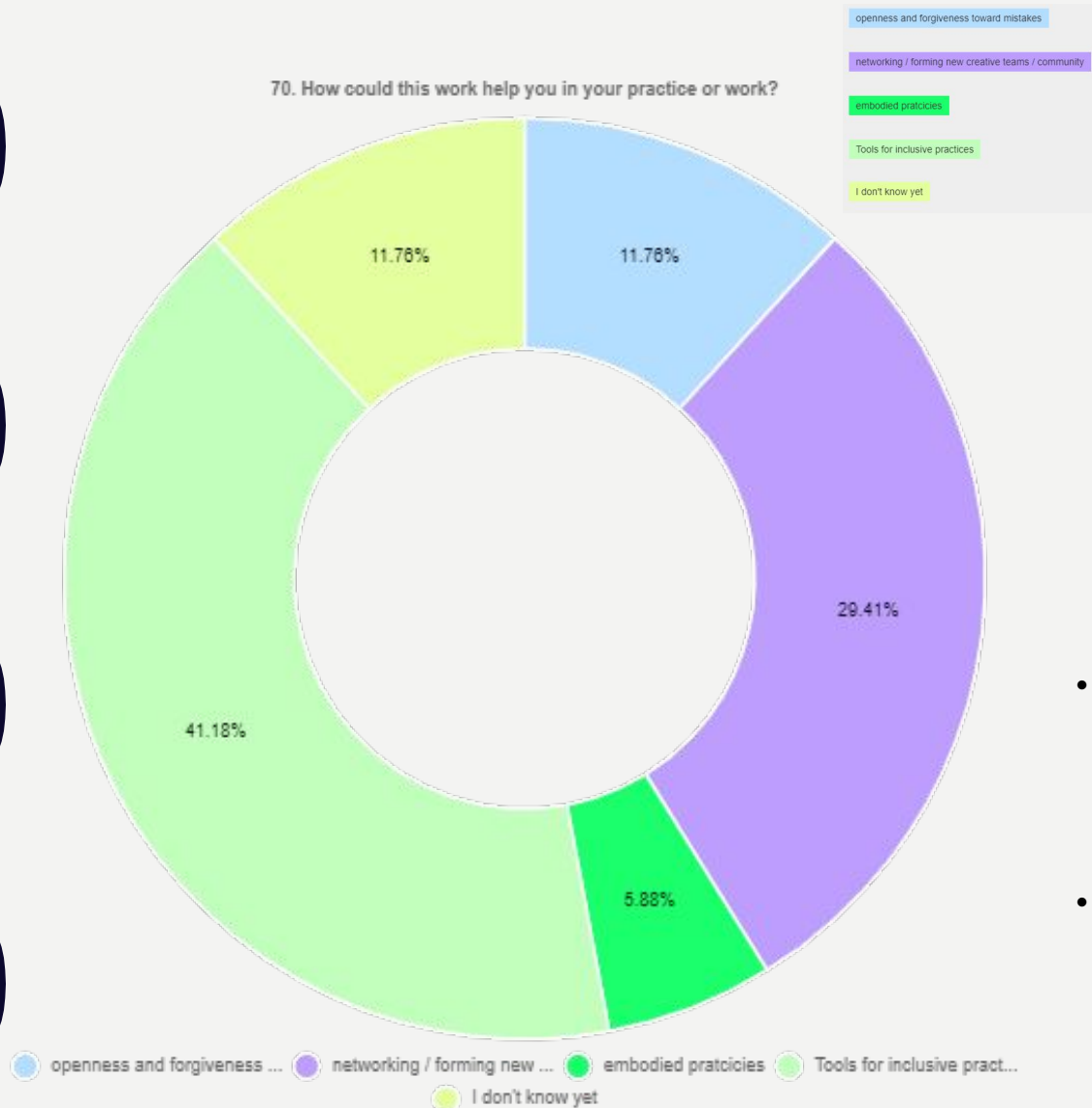
- “I would have liked a bit more time with the group discussions, or a second step from the discussion to action...as they didn't always lead to something we could do...?”
- “I had wished to be able to hear the other stories, as we as the storytellers were at a disadvantage during the later conversations, since we were only listen to our partnered storyteller. Perhaps could have been a pre-conference session where we both practiced and shared our stories among other storytellers. In lieu of that, perhaps our notes could be shared beforehand. As well, the conference ended in mid-conversation and there was not an adequate opportunity to "check out" or to summarize our discoveries. Perhaps the timeline for the conference could either be extended for an additional day or the programming more condensed.”

creating a safer space (in terms of identity and/or resources)

- “Identify and address the fact that we were not all equals entering into the workshop. Everyone was coming in with deep baggage.
- I would have liked more consistency around Covid-19 measures. The emails prior to the retreat said we would talk about what was needed collectively on the first day - instead, the leaders of the retreat took off their masks and said that anyone who was speaking was allowed to de-mask (which was not actually true health-restrictions-wise). This was largely unnecessary except for specific access needs, and the microphone would have easily allowed people in masks to be heard. I regret not speaking up about this.

SURVEY: HOW COULD THIS WORK HELP YOU AND YOUR PRACTICE OR WORK?

70. How could this work help you in your practice or work?



Tools for inclusive practices

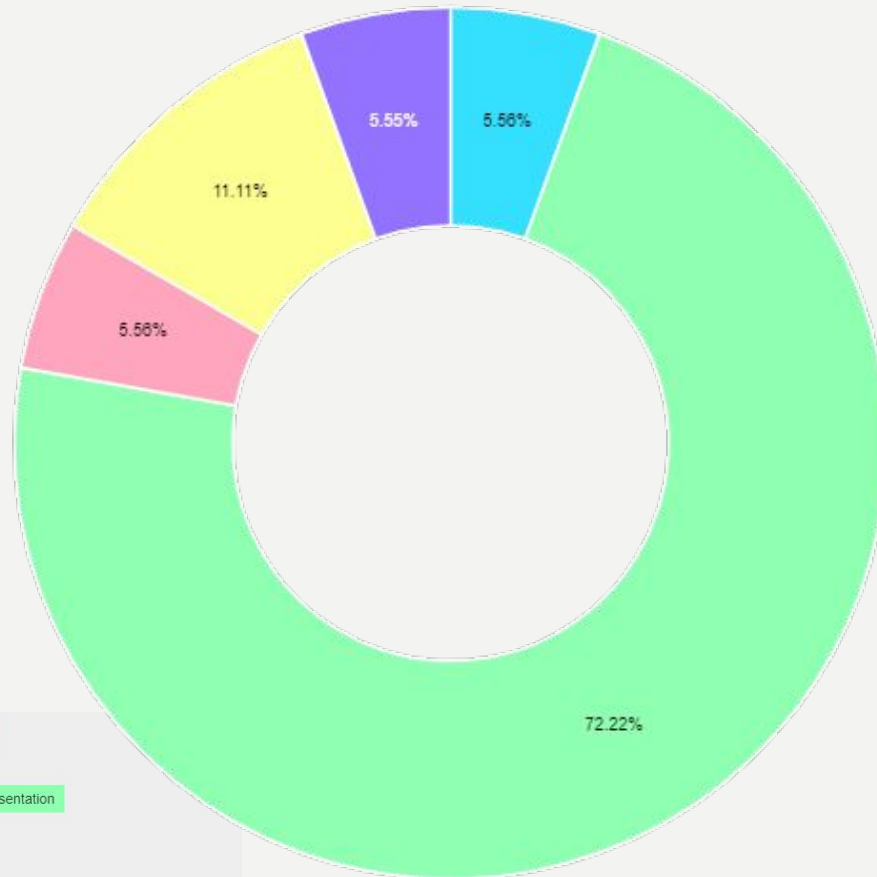
- “I look forward to incorporating the ideas on inclusivity into my daily practice, and challenge my thoughts about access being difficult.”
- “Ultimately this is going to impact how I interact with others and how I view the practice. I am feeling even more gravitated towards telling stories outside the Western canon and feel more comfortable working with people of different backgrounds and abilities.”
- To take the time to understand another different point of view before dismissing it in any way. How important and life changing strong and genuine connections are with other artists. And the power of forgiveness and the power of the collective. I felt we were all equal in the room and will take that with me wherever I go.

networking / forming new creative teams / community

- “New ways to build community in process and with audience. Breaking the ice of talking to some of the professional theatre community. Now we know who each other are, so I hope we acknowledge that around town going forward. New ways of belonging in Edmonton's theatre community to think about.”
- “I am hoping that the connections I made will impact my community theatre in terms of productions offered, and artists willing to be part of productions and also the board. I hope I had the chance to build those bridges.”

SURVEY: WHAT IS THE MOST URGENT CONVERSATION THAT THE EDMONTON THEATRE COMMUNITY NEEDS TO HAVE AT THIS MOMENT?

80. What is the most urgent conversation that the Edmonton arts community needs to have at this moment?



diversity / other stories inclusion and representation

- “How do we consistently ensure each project brings in diverse perspectives to help it be accountable toward larger social goals?”
- “Putting out a mandate about inclusivity is NOT enough. I want to see more leaders putting in the work and going out into the community to expand themselves. This needs to be talked about. Genuine relationships.”
- “How to create spaces for emergent artists of diverse backgrounds to have space to share their work and experience.”
- “To be truthful about the stories we tell on Edmonton stages. And to ask ourselves, why are we telling these stories? Who have we continually left behind and why? And how to change our processes to include more diverse artists. And how can we develop and nurture underrepresented playwrights in the future.”
- “How can we hold intersectionality? How can we have more diversity in power?”

to separate from the "western model"

- “Moving away from western theatre and training and work with in the many diverse communities to create and tell the stories that reflect the communities lives with a focus on BIPOC storytellers and artists.”

How to deal with cultural/identity conflict

diversity / other stories inclusion and representation

openness to conversation

to separate from the "western model"

to build a bridge between community-engaged theatre and mainstream theatre

REFLECTIONS

Postmarginal underlined several themes that appeared to be of importance to the community. These are not meant to be seen as conclusive nor exhaustive and refer to Postmarginal's internal reflection.

- The retreat demonstrated that the community wants to meet together, that conversations can be positive and generative of new ideas and new groupings. A three-day event offers the time to open these conversations.
- For this cohort, the structural problems preventing the representation and inclusion of marginalized voices are as important as the relational issues.
- A couple of questions remained at the end of the retreat: How do we transform the experience of the retreat into concrete practices? (in rehearsal, training studios, production practices, etc.)? How can Postmarginal engage with communities to accompany them in their own self-directed activities?

8-MONTH FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

Eight months following the event we sent out a [supplementary follow-up survey](#) to all the participants with the following questions:

Question # 1: What changes have you noticed in your own practice or working methods since the retreat in September?

Question # 2: What new projects or initiatives have you been involved with (or have heard about) come out of the work of Postmarginal Edmonton?

Question # 3: What are the next pathways for you and for the border community in terms of what you learned at Postmarginal Edmonton? a. I just want to create work. b. I want to work towards more institutional change. c. I want to go deeper into the conversation d. Other

“Initially there was some sadness as I didn’t really feel I was provided any practical actions to change what I was doing. I’ve always reflected in an ongoing way, and in my latest project I embraced collaboration even more than I usually do and actively worked to open communication with all members of the team and relished the input and results of those open discussions.”

“I feel more brave to pursue my own projects.”

“Generally, I am reminded and seek out a folks from a larger pool of people. I’m reminded that there are so many more people that I don’t know in our community so I push myself to reach out in different ways and through different avenues.

“I’ve become more collaborative, less focused on product, and trying to ensure that everyone in the project is kept engaged to the level they’re comfortable with.”

“I’ve noticed greater willingness to speak up when needed when I’m not in a position of power.”

“I am more capable of asking myself intersectional questions like “Who might this work most affect? Who might want their thoughts included here?””

“I feel more confident in ways of going forward within shared community.”

WHAT'S NEXT?

- Creating teaching tools?
- Postmarginal has been invited to join the SSHRC project “Staging Better Futures”. This represents opportunities to connect with post-secondary institutions in Edmonton
- An Western Canadian initiative to look at casting practices in Canadian theatre is forming.



“I like the questions to the storytelling and also the process and structures you employed. I would love to have had the process written down in our packet to bring to our theatre companies and theatre in the university.”

Dr. Jean O’Hara