



**City of Kingston
Report to Council
Report Number 18-089**

To: Mayor and Members of Council
From: Lanie Hurdle, Commissioner, Community Services
Resource Staff: Colin Wiginton, Cultural Director
Date of Meeting: March 6, 2018
Subject: Municipal Funding for the Kick & Push Festival through a Service Level Agreement with the Kingston Theatre Alliance

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to share information with Council about the evolution of the Kick & Push Festival since the City of Kingston first helped to establish it in 2015 and to secure Council's approval to continue to support this innovative, community-driven cultural initiative in 2018 through a service level agreement with the Kingston Theatre Alliance.

As Council is aware, the absence of summer programming at the Grand Theatre has been an issue of concern identified for some years among numerous stakeholders within the community. The challenge in the past had been that summer programming presented at the Grand Theatre often proved unsustainable because of the high level of risk involved and the fact that it failed to attract the audience numbers needed to make it work.

In response, staff identified that a collaborative effort would be required to develop a summer programming model that would be viable, sustainable and attractive to audiences by offering something unique at that time of year. The Kingston Culture Plan also identified the City of Kingston as being well positioned to facilitate this kind of undertaking so discussions with various community partners began in 2014 and seed funding was allocated as part of the Cultural Services department's 2015 Operating Budget.

The Kick & Push Festival was the result of those early discussions and the City of Kingston continued to support the growth of the Festival in 2016 and 2017 through a Council approved partnership agreement. As it has evolved, the Festival has demanded the commitment of numerous individuals as well as the support of various theatre groups and tourism organizations, including the founding partners Single Thread Theatre Company, Theatre

March 6, 2018

Page 2 of 10

Kingston and Blue Canoe Productions along with tourism partners Downtown Kingston! BIA, The Great Waterway, Kingston Accommodation Partners and Tourism Kingston.

The Kick & Push Festival has now been successfully presented three years in a row and has evolved and grown in ways that have positioned it to move to a next level, both in terms of its programming and its administration. Since 2015, the Festival has featured 18 productions presented at the Grand Theatre and within in the community, eight professional development opportunities for theatre artists and an annual summer theatre camp for children also based at the Grand Theatre. It has also been the impetus for increased activity in and around the performing arts in Kingston and has now moved toward a more professionalized model of practice in which the majority of artists are being paid.

In 2016, the Kingston Theatre Alliance (KTA) officially incorporated as a new not-for-profit performing arts organization in Kingston and took over responsibility for presenting the Festival. It is the KTA with whom the City of Kingston signed a partnership agreement to continue the work of organizing the Festival, though its success continues to depend upon a close collaboration among various individuals, partners and stakeholders.

The Festival remains community-driven but its programming has matured in ways that now attract the attention of artists and audiences outside of Kingston. That was always the hope, though local artists and audiences continue to be a primary focus. They benefit, however, from the attention the Festival has garnered from outside the community. This attention has also made it desirable for a broader cross-section of professional theatre artists in Kingston to get involved in both the Festival and the KTA.

The way the Festival has evolved in three short years has brought increased energy and attention to the local theatre scene. At the same time audience awareness has grown so has the number of artists/participants, supporters and potential funders. It has not been without risk but this attempt to develop a new model of summer programming has shown the City of Kingston can function as a catalyst to help bring together different sectors to achieve innovative and mutually, beneficial outcomes and it is for this reason Council is being asked to continue to invest in the Kick & Push Festival in 2018.

At this juncture it is being recommended that the investment be made through a service level agreement with the Kingston Theatre Alliance that will enable the organization to grow in ways that directly benefit the continuing evolution of the Festival by engaging more artists, attracting new audiences and accessing more diversified sources of funding as well as strengthening the sector overall.

Recommendation

That the Mayor and Clerk be authorized to execute a Service Level Agreement between the City of Kingston and the Kingston Theatre Alliance (KTA) in a form acceptable to the Director of Legal Services & City Solicitor that identifies the services to be provided by the KTA and the associated funding to be issued by the City of Kingston for those services; and

March 6, 2018

Page 3 of 10

That Council approve the release of \$64,500 to the Kingston Theatre Alliance as an operating grant in 2018 from the approved Cultural Services 2018 operating budget; and

That Council also direct and delegate to Cultural Services staff, in coordination with the Recreation and Leisure Services department, in a form acceptable to the Director of Legal Services & City Solicitor, authority to enter into such other agreements with the Kingston Theatre Alliance to provide eight-weeks of summer theatre camps at the Grand Theatre in conjunction with the Kick & Push Festival and such other programming as deemed appropriate by the Cultural Director.

March 6, 2018

Page 5 of 10

Options/Discussion:

Since 2010, the Cultural Services department of the City of Kingston has been working to implement the 60 recommendations included as part of the Kingston Culture Plan. One of those recommendations identified that the Cultural Services department should direct resources “to develop a coordinated and complimentary presenting program and some concept options for a summer festival in Kingston” (Kingston Culture Plan, Recommendation number 6). Further, the Kingston Culture Plan states that the Cultural Services department is “best positioned to facilitate community discussion on the subject, analyze the community’s distinct competencies and develop a thematic focus and practical implementation plan for a Summer Arts Festival”. It also indicates that a successful festival should celebrate Kingston’s unique history in an innovative way and support a vision of cultural development focused on providing high-quality products that enriches the cultural life of residents and enhances the visitor experience.

In 2015, staff responded to that recommendation by engaging in discussions with various community partners to explore what might be possible. The result was the creation of the Kick & Push Festival that involved various local theatre companies like Single Thread Theatre Company, Theatre Kingston and Blue Canoe Productions along with such tourism partners as Downtown Kingston! BIA, The Great Waterway, Kingston Accommodation Partners and Tourism Kingston. The City of Kingston supported this initiative by providing creative input, administrative support and seed funding in 2015 and then by providing further investment through a partnership agreement in 2016 and 2017 ([Council Report Number 16-172](#)).

At the outset, the goals of the Festival were to celebrate community and instill a sense of civic pride while at the same time creating opportunities for creativity and engagement as well as both professional and economic development. Stated in more detail, those goals included the following:

1. To animate the Grand Theatre during the summer months and extend programming out into the community;
2. To provide local artists and arts organizations—amateur and professional—with opportunities to present their work, develop new work and nurture their skills;
3. To engage the community through programming that fosters learning, challenges expectations and that is ultimately entertaining;
4. To build partnerships across the community and across sectors that result in programming that is truly collaborative and sustainable;
5. To provide local businesses and tourism operators with additional assets to attract visitors; and
6. To celebrate Kingston as a place that values culture, fosters creativity and offers a wide range of offerings that are accessible and interesting to a cross-section of people.

The core aspiration identified at the time was to position Kingston as a mid-sized Canadian city that values culture and has ambitions as to how cultural vitality can be fostered and shared. It was also intended that the Festival would provide a way to leverage the creative talent that exists locally and to work in partnership with a range of stakeholders across sectors to present a

March 6, 2018

Page 6 of 10

sense of confidence, creativity and excitement that has the potential to re-brand a community that tends to be more widely recognized for its history and sense of tradition.

The Evolution of the Kick & Push Festival

The Kick & Push Festival has now been successfully presented three years in a row and has featured 18 productions hosted at the Grand Theatre as well as in various locations in and around the downtown core. The Festival has also made professional development a priority and has offered eight workshops, master classes and panel discussions to benefit a combination of both emerging and established theatre artists. From the beginning, those educational ambitions have also included children and young people who have participated in the annual summer theatre camp connected to the Festival that is based at the Grand Theatre.

In its inaugural year, the Festival featured six productions that included 45 different performances. The Festival broke even financially but, more significantly, it engaged close to 170 participants during its run including both paid and volunteer actors, writers, directors, designers, musicians, technicians, panelists, camp staff and workshop facilitators. It also involved the help of an additional 70 plus volunteers who worked to make sure everything ran smoothly. Six local theatre groups also participated as did seven organizational partners—including the City of Kingston—who supported the Festival through a combination of human, financial and in-kind resources. Audience numbers totaled close to 2,700 people with the majority of audience members being local but with some coming from other parts of Ontario and even a handful from outside the Province.

In 2016, the Kingston Theatre Alliance officially incorporated and assumed responsibility for organizing the Festival with the support of the founding partners. The offerings also expanded in 2016 to include a new element—the Storefront Festival—that took over a series of vacant retail spaces in Kingston's downtown core to increase the number of performances available and to expand the reach and impact in terms of offerings and potential audiences. As a result, the Festival benefited from a significant increase in the number of productions presented as well as the size of the audience that attended that totaled approximately 3,600 people. The percentage of available tickets to be sold also increased as did the overall profile of the Festival that reached farther beyond the Grand Theatre itself, animating more of the downtown core.

An unexpected outcome of the Festival has been the ways in which it has helped to seed increased activity among the partner organizations. That had not been expected but resulted in Blue Canoe Productions establishing the Juvenis Festival in 2016 as well as Theatre Kingston establishing the Storefront Fringe in 2017. Inspired in part by its involvement in the Kick & Push Festival, Blue Canoe Productions established the [Juvenis Festival](#) as a youth-led arts festival for young people aged 13-30. Its focus is on arts education, professional development and youth-curated and created arts presentations and it has grown tremendously in terms of scope and support and will be presented for the third time in 2018. Likewise, Theatre Kingston leveraged its involvement in the Kick & Push Festival to secure the support of the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals to establish Kingston's own [Storefront Fringe](#) in 2017.

These ancillary activities have proved beneficial in terms of increasing opportunities for both young and emerging artists in Kingston but it also presented challenges for the Kick & Push

March 6, 2018

Page 7 of 10

Festival with some of its founding partners having focused their energy, effort and resources elsewhere. That forced a need to examine and re-focus the Festival's program that resulted in a shift toward a more professionalized model of practice in 2017. The Festival remained focused on presenting innovative theatre at the Grand Theatre and within the community but it also began to engage mainly professional artists for the first time who had connections to Kingston or whose work was receiving critical acclaim elsewhere.

The result was that, in 2017, the Festival program included a unique selection of new and award-winning work created and presented by a diversity of Canadian artists with experience working with leading companies such as the Shaw and Stratford Festivals as well as the Soulpepper Theatre Company and the indie theatre scene in cities like Toronto. In 2017, the Festival program once again included six productions but also made space for the development of new work and the Festival also partnered with the Dan School of Drama and Music at Queen's University and Volcano Theatre in Toronto to extend its reach and impact in relation to professional development for artists through a program known as [inFORMING Content](#).

The more professionalized model of practice implemented in 2017 improved the overall quality and caliber of the Festival but also impacted sales and attendance because the presentations tended to be smaller in scale and also because the content was more challenging on the whole. By contrast, the benefits included being able to pay artists and the ability to raise the profile of the Festival among artists and audiences outside Kingston that is expected to pay off in the long run as a direct result of increased critical attention. In 2018, the Festival is now well positioned to move to the next level in terms of both programming and administration and a number of the critical pieces needed to make that happen have already begun to be put in place.

The Professionalization of the Kingston Theatre Alliance

The continued growth and success of the Kick & Push Festival is now closely tied to establishing the Kingston Theatre Alliance as the premiere advocate and presenter of innovative professional theatre in Kingston. As originally conceived, the KTA was committed to working with local theatre companies, both amateur and professional, to foster a community of practice that would benefit all involved. The presentation of *The Library Chronicles* in 2012 demonstrated the potential of what could be achieved when a disparate number of theatre companies came together to create collaborative work.

The intent of the KTA was to nurture Kingston as a vibrant and cohesive theatre community made up of theatre artists of varying interests and at various stages of personal and professional development. That initial work was funded by a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation but, in spite of the success of *The Library Chronicles* and subsequent efforts to collaborate, the potential for community-building among the various theatre companies involved, diminished as the funding ran out and their attention turned back to their own work.

That work proved formative, however, and it was in that moment City staff approached the founders of the KTA to propose a way to address the lack of summer programming at the Grand Theatre. The result was the creation of the Kick & Push Festival in 2015 as well as the formal incorporation of the KTA in 2016 as the entity responsible for presenting the Festival. Today, the Festival and the KTA are closely intertwined and their success depends on the ability of the KTA

March 6, 2018

Page 8 of 10

to attract new supporters and a more diverse Board to work with an expanded pool of partners and funders to offer paid opportunities for professional theatre artists to work in Kingston. Community-building and professional development likewise remains central to the mandate of the KTA that, together with presenting the Festival, enable it to provide opportunities for artists and audiences that would not otherwise exist in Kingston.

Together, the Festival and the KTA provide a unique opportunity for sector development that is proving to be attractive and, as such, the KTA Board now consists of a broader range of theatre professionals and community members who are committed to the development of the local theatre scene. They also possess extensive experience in theatre making and organizational development and administration as well as grant writing and revenue development. Among the KTA Board members are the Interim Artistic Director of Theatre Kingston; the Artistic Director of Single Thread Theatre Company; the Artistic Director of the Cellar Door Project; the Director of the Dan School of Drama and Music at Queen's University; the Managing Artistic Director of the Thousand Islands Playhouse; and the Co-Creator & Artistic Director of SpiderWebShow, Canada's only national digital theatre company.

In previous years, the Festival has also benefitted from the support of numerous tourism partners and stakeholders, including Downtown Kingston! BIA, The Great Waterway, Kingston Accommodation Partners and Tourism Kingston. Additional support has also come through funding programs like Canada Summer Jobs and the KTA is also now actively pursuing, and is well poised to receive funding from, other levels of government through such agencies as the Ontario Arts Council and such programs as Celebrate Ontario and the Ontario Cultural Attractions Fund.

The Kick & Push Festival in 2018

In 2018, the Kick & Push Festival is scheduled to begin in mid-July and feature six productions as well as a special lead-off event along with a series of education programs with a particular focus on theatre and performance. Another element that is expected to increase the program offerings and raise the profile of the Festival overall is the re-integration of the Storefront Fringe. This re-integration is advantageous as the dates of the Storefront Fringe had moved to June in 2017 at the request of the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals but subsequent negotiations have allowed the Storefront Fringe to move back to its original timeframe in July so it once again aligns with the Festival.

The Festival is then scheduled to continue through until mid-August with performances happening every week across a wide variety of venues that include the Grand Theatre as well as vacant storefronts and other locations in and around the downtown core. The dates for the Storefront Fringe have been confirmed for July 20 to 28 with the larger Festival is scheduled to take place around those dates, likely from July 18 to August 12. The release date of the full Festival schedule is expected in mid-May with tickets going on sale later that same month. For 2018, the KTA has already committed to hiring a marketing co-ordinator who has been directed to expand the reach of the Festival's marketing from being primarily local to being regional and even provincial in the hopes of expanding the audience draw to Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto and beyond.

March 6, 2018

Page 9 of 10

In support of the 2018 Kick & Push Festival, the Cultural Services department has allocated a total of \$64,500 in its 2018 Operating budget. This funding has already been approved by Council through the annual budgeting process and it is being recommended the City of Kingston enter into a service level agreement with the KTA rather than entering into a more limited partnership agreement as was the case in 2016. Such an approach aligns with how the City of Kingston currently manages its relationships with other umbrella arts and heritage organizations like the Kingston Arts Council and the Kingston Association of Museums, Art Galleries and Historic Sites. The intent is that such an agreement will allow the KTA more freedom and agency to determine how the funds can be used. It is also anticipated that the availability of the City funding will help the KTA to secure additional support from other sources that will not only benefit the Kick & Push Festival but also the KTA's ability to expand its own capacity to pursue a range of other related activities that are anticipated to benefit the sector as a whole.

Existing Policy/By-Law:

The need to allocate resources to develop a summer festival in Kingston was identified as a priority within the Kingston Culture Plan approved by Council in 2010. The presentation of the Kick & Push Festival also aligns with Council's strategic priority to foster artistic and cultural opportunities to support both wealth creation and community vitality. It also aligns with Council's strategic priorities related to tourism and also provides opportunities for youth employment with the support of funding each year through the Canada Summer Jobs program.

Notice Provisions:

Not applicable

Accessibility Considerations:

Not applicable

Financial Considerations:

Funding in the amount of \$64,500 that is needed to support the Kick & Push Festival in 2018 has been allocated and approved as part of the 2018 Operating budget for the Cultural Services department. Recreation & Leisure Services has also allocated funds in their 2018 Operating budget associated with the summer theatre camps to be offered at the Grand Theatre in conjunction with the Kick & Push Festival. Recreation & Leisure Services will be providing one Camp Supervisor to oversee and coordinate the program, cover a portion of the student wages, facilitate registration, pre-camp training and program logistics and provide access to their facilities for related recreational activities. After all costs are recovered, Recreation & Leisure Services will share any camp revenues as outlined in a separate Partnership Agreement with the Kingston Theatre Alliance.

March 6, 2018

Page 10 of 10

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Exhibits Attached:

Not applicable