

PANDEMIC PREPARDNESS

RESEARCH RESPONSE TO
*LESSONS FOR CANADA'S LIVE
PERFORMING ARTS FROM
ACROSS THE G7*

WRITTEN BY JOSH LANGUEDOC



Josh Langedoc

Josh Langedoc is a proud member of Saugeen First Nation and lives as a guest in Treaty 6 Territory as an Anishinaabe playwright, producer, storyteller, and teacher. Since 2018, Josh has been touring his solo performance *Rocko and Nakota: Tales From the Land* to theatres and festivals all across Turtle Island. Some of Josh's other plays include *The Creature in the Dark* (Theatre Prospero/Thousand Faces Festival), *Feast* (Gwaandak Theatre 2023, NewWorks and Fringe 2022), *CIVIL BLOOD: A Treaty Story* (Thou Art Here Theatre), *The Eyes Of Spirits* (Native Earth Performing Arts), and *IN-COR-RI-GI-BLE: The Legend of Thundervoice* (Blyth Festival). Josh also teaches around the Edmonton area with the Citadel's Foote Theatre School, Edmonton Public Schools, Artstrek, Northern Alberta YMCA, and runs the teen playwriting program #WritesOfPassage at Workshop West Playwrights' Theatre. As a producer, Josh has curated the pêhonân Series (Fringe Theatre), the Indigenous Pavilion (Silver Skate Festival), Connections//Collisions (Mile Zero Dance), and #ReconcileThis (National Arts Centre Indigenous Theatre). You may have also seen Josh dawn a leather jacket as Sonny Boy in the Indigenous hit *Bear Grease* (LightningCloud Productions). Directing credits include *Talk Treaty to Me* (Two Families Theatre), and *Identity* (Matthew Creeation, City of Edmonton Residency); assistant director credits include *Beauty and the Beast* (St. Albert Children's Theatre), and *Rose by Tomson Highway* (National Arts Centre Indigenous Theatre). In 2023, Josh finished his MFA Theatre Practice with a focus on Indigenous Playwriting, where he is officially the third Indigenous person to ever finish this program. Josh was also recently honoured with a MacEwan University Distinguished Alumni Award.



PHASE 1: THE DROP

It came creeping in like a title wave. That's the image I kept seeing everywhere online: "COVID-19." A giant wave crashing into the Western world. Behind it, an even bigger tidal wave: "Recession." The message was clear - this thing called COVID-19 was coming. It was going to drop hard onto our shores. And there was not a damn thing we could do about it. We knew it was going to hurt, but the upcoming recession seemed to be the thing that would devastate us. It all just seemed like a bunch of "what if's" at the time. The threat felt real, but the hypotheticals of what would happen drifted through the air, not quite landing on the ground yet.

I had just finished university. Just a young native kid with dreams on the horizon. Somewhere along the lines, I had a mentor. A much older Indigenous person who said to me I belonged onstage. That my presence was needed on Canadian stages. I was hesitant. The arts world had long been a place where I had not seen myself. I can count on one hand the number of times I have seen another native dude onstage. Frankly it may have been on one or two fingers at that time. Either way, I had followed my mentor's advice. Applied, auditioned, got accepted into this exciting acting program, finished with honours grades and several exciting performance credits under my belt, and I could see my path forward. The Canadian stages were mine. After all, Reconciliation was a huge hot topic. Theatres were programming powerful and challenging Indigenous plays, some by playwrights I had just started hearing about who had been writing plays for decades. Others were up and coming names I had heard in the community. And theatres were hungry to build the diversity within their casts. And maybe their production teams? I don't know. Either way, the path seemed clear and I was ready to face it.

I'll never forget the day I crossed the stage. Suddenly it all became real. The real world was on the other side of the auditorium doors. There I stood, all dolled up in my pinstripe suit. Slicked black hair, short, and gelled up into a stylish little cut. Blue tie. And my eagle feather, which I proudly held in my graduation photos. I was proud I did that. All around me people were smiling - parents, children, fellow students, professors. This day meant a lot to me and it was clear it meant a lot to other people too. I knew the rest of my life was ahead of me and that anything was possible.

Fast forward 6 months. I am working at a coffee shop to make ends meet. I had chased a couple auditions and was starting to get noticed. There was even talks of a big show on the horizon in the 2019/2020 season at one of the more daring theatre in town. Say they need some strong Indigenous actors in it. Here I am, pouring drinks for customers, when I start hearing about this tidal wave coming in. At first I dismissed it. It can't be THAT bad. Then the threat seems to grow. By Christmas time, I hear people are dying in Italy. Hospitals are full. Flights are being cancelled to and from certain countries. And people are worried they will be next. "They say it's going to kill millions of people." It can't come here. There's no way.

New year happens. Life goes on. The future still crawls towards me.

And then, March 2020, almost one full year after I cross the stage and begin this new phase of life, suddenly my entire life drops. The first person in the country sick with this new virus. Then the 5th. Then the 28th. Then the first death. Then the second, someone who is only four years older than me. The coffee shop closes down and temporarily lays us off. My upcoming auditions get cancelled. And before I know it, I am sitting alone in my basement suite with no income and businesses ordering us to "stay home."

Where will I go now? What am I to do?

This is already starting to feel lonely.

PHASE 2: THE TURN TO DIGITAL

It's been a year into this "pandemic." That's what everyone keeps calling it. A "pandemic." I still refuse to believe it. This is all just a load of bullshit meant to keep us locked indoors.

Or is it?

I don't know...all I know is I'm lonely. And sad. And miserable. I just want to get my life back. I feel like I am sitting in my own filth just wasting away. I've been able to keep myself busy with reading, watching shows, and keeping my eyes on the postings. Had to move back home to keep myself in some sort of financially stable place. My parents leave me alone. At least I have them. But sometimes I wish I was wasting my funds away back in that basement suite. My parents look at each other differently. They seem at each other's throats more. Seems like forcing them to be home and spending all of their time together is causing them to see each other with new eyes. Or maybe they're really seeing each other for the first time. It still doesn't help how lonely and miserable I feel. I go for really, really long walks just to get away from it.

What's keeping me sane during these times is the odd post I find online - "looking for digital storyteller." "Casting online production of _____" I've applied for a few of these. And done a few of these. My parents just have a crappy webcam that I can use. Those have been the real saving graces in my life. I hate the idea of digital theatre, but I guess this is how it has to be for now. It's unsafe to gather in person. I get it. But is theatre meant to be seen online? I guess it makes it more accessible to people who can't go to the theatre. Or are halfway across the country. But theatre isn't shot like a movie, so I am sure it just looks dumb and amateurish.

Maybe I've got this backwards. The few digital things I have done get beamed right into people's houses. From my end it feels like I'm talking to a camera with emptiness on the other side. But the people at the other end of the camera are probably just as lonely and miserable as I am. I probably give them a bit of a break from thinking about the rest of the world. How cool. Now if only I could do more of that on my own, without having to wait for these calls for submissions to come in.

Wait a minute...what's this?

This email in my inbox is something new. "\$5000 micro grant to all artists seeking to create digital art. First priority will be given to artists from underrepresented communities." \$5000...that's 5 months rent at my old basement suite. And I could make my own stories without having to worry about what others want. Now that would be cool.

Wait a minute, and now this?

"It has come to our attention that you identify as an Indigenous artist. Consider creating a free account on the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance. Membership guarantees you a free tech bundle of camera and recording equipment." I'm sorry, let me read that again... "Membership guarantees you a free tech bundle of camera and recording equipment." No, I did read that right. Seriously? I could record my own stuff and have better equipment to record it with?

This can't be real. It has to be spam. I know there have been all sorts of scams rolling around the internet while we are all stuck at home. Guess that's one thing that stays the same in this world - people still are trying to take advantage of people while they are lonely or scared.

I probably shouldn't click on this link...but maybe I should...OK fine. Here we go.

This website looks legit. These people seem real. Is this true? “Funded by the Canada Council for the Arts.”
“Federal Government of Canada to release thousands of dollars to help artists, particularly those from marginalized communities, to help them grow as artists and have income during this pandemic.”

Guess it's worth a shot. I'll apply and see what comes of it. I'd love to create a video on how miserable I've been feeling. Others probably need to hear it. Then maybe I can use it to reach out to others like me. I never had a clear idea of who my people are. Where my ancestors come from. And I'm so far away from my home land. And I grew up in this big city with parents who are still together. I think...

I wonder if others out there have stories like mine...



PHASE 3: WAIT...IS THIS REALLY HAPPENING?

I am unbelievably excited. And nervous. But it's that nervousness you feel right before you do something you are meant to do. Something that you know is going to be an incredible step in the right direction. It's like the entire previous 2 years has been worth the pain and misery. Today is the first day I start a brand new position. Part remote and part in-person. When we are in person we still have to mask up, which is good. I had this damn COVID-19 and it was not fun. I do not want to get anyone sick or to get myself that sick again. But it is nice to know that if I want to work from home I can. This is an indeed exciting new world we are starting to open up, and I could not be more excited to be a part of it. For today, I officially begin this job as a coordinator. This big theatre organization needs someone like me on their leadership team to help create opportunities for other Indigenous artists like me. They say they were impressed with all of the digital stories I have made over the last 2 years. Nice to know someone saw those! They say I have an important voice. Vision. And an energy that can excite others. Do they really see a gift inside of myself that I did not know that I had?

I never saw myself as a coordinator. I am an actor. I want to emote and share my feelings with people. Now I am to create opportunities for others? Build community? Create space for artists to grow as we rebuild our industry? And to help Indigenous artists find their voice? And...gulp...be organized? This whole job seems like a lot. But I know I am up for the challenge. I trust what they see in me. Maybe I am starting to see it in myself. Maybe I CAN help rebuild this world and regain what we have lost over the last 2 years.

Since those Black Lives Matter marches I feel like the world has completely shifted. As we have stayed at home for almost 2 years I feel like the world has opened up. People are staring racial issues right in the face. People seem united to make this world better for those who have been oppressed. The world was sharing memes about how rare fish and animal life were returning to various waters and forested areas just because we had to stay home and let nature run its course. Imagine what would happen if we did that all of the time. For the first time in a long time, I share an optimism. We can heal the land. We can right the wrongs of the past. And I am a part of the generation who will be paving the way for this exciting future.

A lot of organizations are now talking about the TRC Calls to Action. I have to admit, I haven't read them all myself, but I know it is a big document. I know it is going to take some time to address all of those calls to action. But I see so many organizations reaching out to elders. Bringing in experts. Trying to make opportunities to bring in other Indigenous people like me. And not just that, but weave our teachings into their infrastructure. That's a big word, "infrastructure." I only started using it recently. How cool! I am a part of an organization's infrastructure. And I get to carve the infrastructure around - shape it, like messy play clay.

They say I am here because the organization got a large grant from somewhere. A grant meant to boost the diversity within the organization. I don't know what that means through? The contract is for one year, but does that mean they can only do this work for one year? Am I just here temporarily? Either way, I'm fine. I'm just grateful I get to be here at all. My bosses want to flatten the hierarchy. Have us all work together as equals. That feels very Indigenous to me. The circle is sacred and has to be respected. OK, maybe they are right about me. I CAN do this work. I am happy to show them all the power of the circle and how we can flatten that hierarchy together.

I remember over two years ago when I saw a tide on the horizon. The tide of COVID-19. The tide of recession. When I looked up, I saw that massive wave ready to crash into the shores of our lives. Now, when I look up, all I see is eternity. Bright blue as far as the eyes can see. Rolling clouds sprinkled through its blanket. Like small speckles of possibilities against a sea of rolling time. And my eyes are wide open, absorbing and soaking all of it in. The world is ours for the betterment. And I am ready to rise into the strongest version of myself. And our world seems ready to rise to the next best version of itself. Aho, let's go!



I am unbelievably nervous. And anxious. It's that nervousness you feel right after you have done something and are not clear on how you did with it.

I am at the end of this year-long job. So much has happened. I hosted so many artists. Had so many amazing conversations and moments of community. Accomplished everything I wanted to accomplish.

So why am I filled with paralyzing fear and anxiety?

And so, so, so, so tired...

I did everything I wanted to, but I still had to master other forms of digital technology I did not know before. I had to become so familiar with public safety measures. I had to learn how to share this knowledge with everyone in a way that made sense. I had to enforce guidelines and things I feel like I only had basic knowledge of. I had to pretend like I knew more about my culture than I actually did. I had to teach people about things I had only just learned and had to somehow convince them I was an expert in what I was talking about. I found myself helping out other parts of our organization that actually were not written in my job.

I did so many amazing things, yet this is all I can think of.

Worst of all, at one point, I felt like I was floundering. I organized some events where I was left to my own devices to figure things out on my own. I had very little guidance for what was expected of me. And yet I saw people slowly become more and more distanced from me. Like they didn't care. Even though they said they cared. But their body language towards me says something different. Am I going crazy?

I am just so filled with doubt. And so, so, so, SO tired.

As I walk out the door I turn around. Lift my head up again. This time I see something else. We've done the work, we've created some neat opportunities together, and paved the way for some exciting Indigenous initiatives in their infrastructure. But I am the only one leaving after a short one-year contract. Everyone else stays. And everyone else here is still white. My bosses are all white.

And then I think about the other theatre organizations out there. I try to look ahead and see if there are other places I can continue this work. And in all of them, every SINGLE one of them, the bosses are all white. I no longer see a sea of blue, just a wave of white.

This contract. These initiatives. This theatre company getting this grant to do this work. Is this lip service?

PHASE 4: SUSTAINABILITY VS PROGRESSING

I sit at the edge of a pool of water looking up at the sky. Then out across the vast pool. These two parts of the land create such a beautiful mirror of one another - sky and water. And I sit here in the middle of both of them. Caught between the edges of each extreme. And yet I am reminded of two other extremes the rest of the world seems to be caught in. The path between sustainability and progression.

Here we are in 2025. The COVID-19 tidal wave in the rear view mirror. But I feel like those streams are still trickling under our feet as we walk forward on whatever stage of the path we are on now.

As I look around at the world we are in now, I don't know where we are going anymore. Digital Theatre is less and less of a thing. So many organizations seem to be rolling back their EDI, BLM, and TRC recommendations. All of my bosses still are white.

I keep hearing from other theatre professionals that we have to make our practices sustainable. "We cannot take risks that are so large that we won't make money." "This is a great idea, but we need to find connections that will allow us to sustain the idea." "Owning a building is not cheap and we lost A LOT of money through COVID." I get it. It's just as those memes predicted - the recession was real. Is real.

And yet I still hear glimmers of voices trying to advance us towards that age of equality. A world where Indigenous voices are at the forefront of decision making. That our people are not left behind anymore. That we can actually make reparations to honour that massive document of TRC recommendations. That we have to flatten the hierarchy. And part of how we flatten the hierarchy is to stop having white bosses everywhere. That we truly need spaces of equality where there are no hidden expectations put on us.

I recently read something about theatre that has stuck with me. Theatres have season subscriptions. Patrons buy tickets to their entire season and commit to seeing every single show. Yet the idea of a season pass creates a "homogeneous and stable audience illusion." Let's break this down. Homogeneity refers to a group of people that share the same characteristics. Stable audience - a group of people who continually and repeatedly return over and over again. Illusion - a fake quality that appears to be real. It's sad but true. Season subscriptions assume there is a group of audience who will always return because they will always see themselves in those stories. There is no flexibility in who has access to those stories and those spaces. As long as theatres have a consistent base that returns over and over again, it creates an illusion for the rest of the community. It normalizes certain people in those spaces. I am more concerned with who is not a part of those season subscriptions. People like me.

I guess that's the problem with a tidal wave. It's big. And when it hits, it hits hard. It over saturates the area it hits, and then it takes years and years to fully dry out. And what remains? Some destruction. Some relief that they are still alive. Maybe some optimism for how to rebuild the zone of destruction. And that's only to account for one tidal wave. We had two - COVID-19 and the recession that followed.

I recognize the good that came from it. I recognize the bad that came with it.

And here I am still standing at the edge of the pool looking up at the sky. Caught between two possibilities. Not sure if I should walk forward, walk back, or stand still. For now, here is where I will stay. Between the sky and the pool. Meditating and still between the edges of sustainability and progression.

Awake and asleep.

Driven but practical.

And still feeling that tidal wave below my ankles.

