



Covid Visions

SHOWBIZ

Gordon Tootoosis Nīkānīwin Theatre,
Little Manitou Art Gallery, Yorkton Film Festival +
Amberlin Hsu

by
STEVEN ROSS SMITH



Saskatchewan
Arts Alliance

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Presenting organizations and their directors are finding that drawn curtains and closed doors present challenges, stir anxieties, yet offer glimmers of opportunity.

Ed Mendez, director at Saskatoon's Gordon Tootoosis Nīkānīwin Theatre, looks to the past to retain faith in the future and says: "Theatre is the only institution that has been dying for four thousand years and has never succumbed."

He sees potential in a future that incorporates more digital technology. "The fun thing about digital programming is that it can be watched by anyone anywhere, so it doesn't matter where you are in the country or in the world, you can end up seeing a show from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan."

Amberlin Hsu, designer and principle with the innovative It's Not A Box Theatre, and set designer for Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan, sees similar possibilities. "There will be more people starting to use apps or software to enjoy arts."

Amberlin has an unusual pandemic experience. She's been stuck in Tokyo for five months, after going on a personal visit. "I am losing jobs as a designer...especially an international one which involves artists from Saskatoon, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and possibly more...broke my



Actors at the Gordon Tootoosis Nīkānīwin Theatre.

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heart.” And with no work with this summer’s Shakespeare productions, she has turned her attention to learning, especially about digital capability.

In a whole other realm of presentation, Sarah McKen’s Little Manitou Art Gallery, is making effort to adjust in an area where tourism plays a big part in drawing audience. Situated at Watrous, businesses and cultural establishments – Danceland, Manitou Springs Hotel and Spa, and Little Manitou Art Gallery – rely on each other for visitor draw. “Covid-19 has had a dramatic effect on the community because those businesses have had to shut down,” says McKen. In her small gallery buildings, she shows the work of more than sixty artists and also presents musicians on her outdoor stage through the summer. “I’ve been very proud that we connect with music, with visual arts, literary arts, performing arts, even sometimes culinary arts.” Her opening this year was delayed beyond the May long weekend by Covid restrictions. “This summer we’re not going to see visitors from our neighbouring provinces. That’s a big hit to the economy.” So she’s looking long term toward next summer, but also to taking on “a new challenge...working towards my online store.”



Above and Below: Little Manitou Gallery hosts many performers on their outdoor stage.



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The Yorkton Film Festival whose gathering draws filmmakers and film enthusiasts in late May from across the country and beyond, for screenings and informative live sessions, has been cancelled, but not entirely. Film screenings are a bit more adaptable to dissemination platforms than some mediums, and so the Festival has retained momentum, though altered. They have adapted their Golden Sheaf Awards event. It was not held 'live' but was broadcast on Access 7 and on their website. There were film clips and winner reactions to their twenty-nine awards. Nonetheless, many ancillary events did not occur, and extra effort were undertaken to retain essential sponsorships. Executive Director Randy Goulden notes, "What we miss most is working with the community of Yorkton, which is always so hospitable. And we miss the smell of popcorn in our office that went with the monthly Open Cinema screenings in our mini-cinema." While keeping this year's excitement active and beginning to plan for next year, the festival is approaching audit time and Goulden notes that



Above: Artist Amberlin Hsu.



“we won’t know how intense the financial implications will be until we get a couple of months down the road.”

McKen too addresses financial implications for Little Manitou: “I’m a farmer’s daughter and an artist so I’m well-practiced at trying to get by with that minimum cash flow.”

At Yorkton Film Festival, “we’re working hard to reassure our community that we will be back with a vengeance next year,” says Goulden.

Amberlin Hsu muses. “Lots of people think that corona virus is killing the arts industry, but I think it’s also making the [virtual] revolution move faster. It will speed up the cultural exchange.”

Ed Mendez is reaching out. “With the right relationship-building we can ensure that our shows can be seen by many more people than they have been in the past.”

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Steven Ross Smith is a poet and arts writer. He has written for literary and arts publications across the country. Over three decades, has crafted the innovative six-book poetic series *fluttersong*. He has just completed a two-year term as Banff Poet Laureate. His work appears in print, audio and video in Canada, USA, and abroad. He lives and writes in Saskatoon.