Vancouver after 2010: An Introduction

Peter Dickinson, Kirsty Johnston, Keren Zaiontz

Canadian Theatre Review, Volume 164, 2015, pp. 5-9 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

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Vancouver after 2010: An Introduction
by Peter Dickinson, Kirsty Johnston, and Keren Zaiontz

According to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), planning for and working to realize an event legacy for a host city is an essential part of being awarded the Olympic and Paralympic Games. The IOC also mandates that each host city mount a Cultural Olympiad showcasing, often over successive years, the best in local, national, and international art and performance. What, then, is the cultural legacy of an Olympics—and how do we measure it? As playwright and theatre director Marie Clements asks in this issue, what is the equivalent for a local arts community of a gleaming new hockey rink or a sleekly designed swimming pool? The question is an important one, because while it is most often artists who are called upon to produce the symbolic character, festive tone, commemorative feelings, and aesthetic look of an Olympic and Paralympic Games—via opening and closing ceremonies, public art commissions, performance programming, and even the design of medals, logos, and mascots—it is this same group that often bears the brunt of post-Olympic austerity budgets and funding cuts. In the case of Vancouver, which (together with the resort town of Whistler) hosted the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games, these cuts actually began before the Games themselves, and as Duncan Low summarizes in his essay in this issue, arts funding in British Columbia has still not returned to pre-2009 levels. One immediate consequence for the theatre community in Vancouver was that even a venerable institution like the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre Company, whose finances were already precarious, was unable to sustain its operations past the one-time infusion of Olympic special event funding. As Clements and PuSh Festival Artistic and Executive Director Norman Armour both note in these pages, the struggles that existed for the arts community before the Olympics still pertain: access to funding, access to space, and a competition for audiences. Yet both Armour and Clements insist that the 2010 Cultural Olympiad helped them produce work of a scale that they would otherwise have been unable to realize. Employing a baseball metaphor, Armour suggests that the Big Show that is the Olympic spotlight forced local cultural producers to step up to the plate, be it in terms of commissioning new work, forging international partnerships, or making strategic technical alliances locally. Those artists and companies that survived the spotlight, he suggests, found a new level of maturity that allowed them to move forward on their own terms once the Olympics left town.

In the years since sociologist Maurice Roche furthered the academic study of mega-events like Olympic Games, World Expos, and World Cups with his book Megaevents and Modernity, researchers have tracked how cities and citizens are transformed by mega-events through urban development (Burbank, Andranovich, and Heying); security and surveillance (Bennett and Haggarty); initiatives in environmental sustainability (Hayes and Karamichas; Karamichas); restrictions on peaceful demonstrations, as well as the rise of human rights abuses (Lenskyj, “Olympic Industry and Civil Liberties”; Zervas); and the transformation of host cities into “urban entertainment destinations” (Hannigan; Harvey). However, comparatively little attention has been paid to how art and cultural programs are often conscripted to articulate the supra-national agendas of urban mega-events, nor how these programs might also supervene the economic instrumentalism of the Olympic Industry (Lenskyj, Olympic Industry Resistance) through expressly local acts of creative resistance that question expedient narratives of place promotion. The essays in this special issue of Canadian Theatre Review aim to fill that gap by focusing on a case study with which the three of us, as editors, have vested scholarly interests: that is, how artistic production in the Cultural Olympiad and Games is not only a stage for celebration but part of larger globalizing processes through which we have variously assessed activism, cultural expression, and neoliberal governance (Dickinson; Johnston; Harvie and Zaiontz). We brought these separate research agendas together in the summer of 2014 as part of a conference at Simon Fraser University called “The Life and Death of the Arts in Cities after Mega-Events,” to which we invited academic colleagues, artists, and activists from London, as well as other parts of Canada. Here we present a selection of the presentations, as well as additional commissioned pieces, focused...
specifically on the cultural landscape and politics of Vancouver after 2010.

We begin in the public realm where several of the artists in this issue have situated their work. Vanessa Kwan, Barbara Cole, and Lorna Brown, independent artists and curators, and members of Other Sights for Artists’ Projects, discuss public artwork they installed both in the heart of, and removed from, Olympic spectacle. With the exception of Kwan’s Vancouver, Vancouver, which transformed Olympic tourism into an act of self-conscious framing through the use of cut-out postcards, the public art pieces discussed here make meaning through sustainable materials and local partnerships. The Games Are Open, Digital Natives, and Geyser for Hillcrest Park are embedded in their surroundings. From wheat boards to electronic billboards, all three works intervene in their respective environments by drawing attention to existing urban infrastructures and, in the process, shifting (ever so slightly) how they operate. In the case of The Games Are Open, the work encouraged stewardship from a local resident whom Barbara Cole describes in her piece as a “rogue gardener,” a citizen who continues to tend to the organic artwork despite threats of eviction from the city.

Alex Bulmer took inspiration from her encounters with the rogue gardener at the Mega-Events conference, and the idea of activists working outside of systems, for her script in this issue. Fix is a play about disability, access, and artists, in which a young woman navigates London’s underground while trying to find an audition in a city radically reducing essential services for Deaf and disabled people, including proper transport access. (These cuts follow a Paralympics Games and a national celebration of disability arts roundly described by organizers as the “greatest ever.”) Partly this play draws on Bulmer’s experience as an actor, director, and playwright formerly based in the UK, where she was deeply involved both with Graeae Theatre, an inclusive disability theatre company, and the 2012 London Cultural Olympiad and its Unlimited Festival program. First produced by London UK’s Theatre Centre in March 2015, Fix interrogates the wider themes of this issue within an artistic and performative register.

Bulmer’s play, and the research behind it, is in part about the frequent disjunction between a mega-event city’s global aspirations and the lived realities of its local population. In the case of Vancouver and Whistler, a confrontation with the local was nowhere more immediately apparent—and consequential—than in the Vancouver Organizing Committee’s (VANOC) need to solicit the participation of the Four Host First Nations (FHFN), as the Games events would be taking place on the traditional unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Lil’wat Nations. Aboriginal art and cultural practice could be witnessed everywhere during the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games, from both opening ceremonies to the city’s annual Talking Stick Festival. However, during the 2010 Cultural Olympiad, it was the FHFN Aboriginal Pavilion, prominently located downtown on the Queen Elizabeth Theatre Plaza, that became the most visible site of rich cultural activity by First Nations and First Peoples. In receiving the commission to create the closing performance for the Pavilion, Indigenous theatre artist Marie Clements was conscious of her responsibility to make a piece “from here,” something that spoke to the history, both positive and negative, of Indigenous social justice in BC. In conversation with Peter Dickinson, Clements discusses the research and frenzied rehearsal that went into the creation of the original installation version of The Road Forward, as well as the personal and performative legacies of its ongoing development.

Following Dickinson’s interview with Clements, Selena Coute examines the 2013 run of The Road Forward at the PuSh Festival long after the spectacle of the Winter Games. She shows how Clements not only reaches back to showcase the activist history of the Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood of British Columbia, but uses The Road Forward to engage the present Idle No More movement and visually memorialize murdered and missing Indigenous women. The Road Forward recuperates spectacles from World Fairs to present-day Games that cast Indigenous people as pre-modern subjects whose “savageness” confirmed the exalted values of Olympism and the host nation. The production stages an activist mode of performance that re-presents Indigenous peoples on their own terms as resilient, self-determining subjects.

The modern Olympics’ history of racializing the bodies of athletes and performers is addressed in Janice Forsyth and Audrey Giles’s edited collection, Aboriginal Peoples and Sport in Canada. Erica Commons reviews this anthology with an emphasis on those contributions that examine Aboriginal cultural expression in the Montreal 1976 and Vancouver 2010 Games. Her review details how Aboriginal participation was often treated as Canadian participation in ways that not only undermined First Nations sovereignty, but failed to acknowledge colonial violence or, at best, sought to contain it to the distant past.

It is precisely because the IOC is committed to grand narratives, such as “building a peaceful and better world through sport” (“Olympism in Action”), that the Olympics have historically been a place to perform hegemonic representations of the nation. Duncan Low critiques the machinery of this narrative through hard data analysis. Low draws from his “Cultural Olympiad Impact Study” to discuss how Olympic funding spikes and declines in the lead up to, during, and following the Vancouver Cultural Olympiad financially impacted the arts. He demonstrates how cultural policy planning by the provincial Liberal party during the Olympic decade constituted a series of concentrated blows to arm’s-length funders such as the British Columbia Arts Council, with the aim of bringing non-profit art and culture into the domain of the market. The Olympic Games and Cultural Olympiad created a permissive context to neoliberalize provincial arts funding, with the lasting legacy being “a continuous decline in per capita spending on arts and culture.”

Negotiating the precarious movement between abundance and scarcity of BC arts funding was just one of the Olympic-related risks confronted by cultural producers and programmers like the PuSh Festival’s Armour. Another was timing. Faced with a juggernaut like the Cultural Olympiad arriving in town just when one normally gets set to throw one’s own party might compel some organizations to feel a need to compete, using special-event monies, for example, to expand programming. As Armour details, PuSh’s strategy was actually to do less in terms of overall programming, investing extra Olympiad funding instead in the scale and
quality and expressive audacity of individual shows. This would seem to be a lesson well learned, as doing more with less appears to be the only guaranteed legacy of a mega-event like the Olympics.

Disability arts organizations in the city pursued a different strategy, building on past successes but taking their work in new directions. David Roche, a playwright and comedian, and current interim co-artistic director of Realwheels, a disability theatre company, reflects on the challenges presented by the surge in Olympic funding both for Realwheels and other disability arts organizations. In retrospect, however, he notes the range of ways in which the disability arts community pulled together during and after the Games, as disability artists mentored one another and worked out new strategies of inclusion, initiative, and cooperation. Geoff McMurchy, former artistic director of Kickstart, Vancouver’s pioneering disability arts organization, examines the ways in which Kickstart responded to new funding initiatives during the Games, adapting previous festival formats, and initiating new dialogues around arts and inclusion. In different ways, both Roche and McMurchy explain how the time-limited opportunities of the Games came with both benefits and costs for their organizations, and see positive legacies in terms of the responses and creative community-building efforts of disability artists.

The response of the independent theatre community was strongly bound up in acts of collective resistance and a rejection of the Games as a unanimously successful venture for Vancouver. In her collaborations with Neworld, theatre maker Adrienne Wong describes how that resistance ranged from explicit critique in events like The Apocalyptic Cabaret to acts of social engagement in festivals like HIVE 3. Wong also reflects on her ambitious site-specific audio plays, the PodPlays, produced as part of the PuSh Festival’s Vancouver 125 celebrations in collaboration with Martin Kinch. She considers how Vancouver’s transformation into a site of global exhibition and spectacle filtered into and shaped her artistic practice. As the city increasingly watched itself watching, she was prompted to engage in a self-reflexive tour of its streets and neighbourhoods. Her own PodPlays soundwalk through Gastown, Look Up (with music by Joelysa Pankanea), is an online feature and available to viewers on CTR’s YouTube channel.

Look Up began in the atrium of SFU Woodward’s (SFUW), a building whose fraught redevelopment and opening paralleled Vancouver’s Olympic and Paralympic preparations: from the awarding of the city’s bid in 2003 to the welcoming of athletes and spectators in February 2010. In his contribution to this special issue, SFUW Director of Cultural Programming Michael Boucher recounts the roller coaster ride to ensure that the venue was ready in time to play host to Robert Lepage’s The Blue Dragon as part of the 2010 Cultural Olympiad programming. As crucially, he discusses SFUW staff’s efforts to forge an aesthetic and social identity for the venue post-Olympics, one that is responsible to and engaged with its community neighbours in Vancouver’s impoverished, but also rapidly gentrifying, Downtown Eastside.

One cannot overestimate the extent to which Vancouver, as a global city—and one, moreover, that serves as Canada’s gateway to the Asia Pacific—has been shaped by mega-events. It was, after all, Expo 86 that led directly to the development of North False Creek by Li Ka-Shing’s Concord Pacific (see Dickinson 35–38; Olds 107–108; Robinson and Zaiontz), transforming this area into a forest of steel and glass condo towers and jump-starting a Vancouver real estate boom that shows no signs of abating. Melissa Poll assesses the cultural landscape connected to the housing market in her article. Telescoping on Lepage’s The Blue Dragon, Poll examines how Vancouver’s connection to the Asia-Pacific gateway is knotted up in a long history of racial tension and discrimination against Chinese immigrants that today is coded in the racist slang “Hongcouver” and “monster houses.” Her analysis of The Blue Dragon reveals how certain characters function as analogues for Canada–China relations: Canada is dramatized as a nation limited by its own national self-interest while China boldly pursues global influence. Poll argues that this parochial nationalism is imprinted in Vancouver’s conflicted rather than confident status as a global city.

Kelsey Blair also considers how the local, national, and global intersect through an analysis of the 2010 men’s gold hockey medal match between Canada and the US. She positions the match as the “affective climax of the Winter Games,” one that was carefully orchestrated by Olympic organizers and conformed to with docility by the crowd in the stadium and streets of Vancouver. Blair examines the material factors that shaped the event, from the hyperbole of Olympic sport journalism to the “red mittens and flags carried by spectators,” all of which contributed to what she calls the “affective legacy” of the Games. She shows how spectacles of national belonging operate through powerful feelings that may feel personal but owe much to dominant structures of power.

It may be some time yet before we can fully research the many planning decisions that contributed to the affective legacy of the gold medal match. In February 2015, the records belonging to VANOC were transferred to the City of Vancouver archives. But at 25 terabytes worth of information, researchers won’t have a chance of developing archive fever any time soon; key documents including board minutes and financial statements will not be available to the public until 2025. Furthermore, contracts and leases will be off limits for a further five years, until 2030, unless “third parties permit release” (Mackin). At a moment when VANOC is legally enforcing archival delay, it is important to initiate our own artist- and research-led archive. From the bidding process to unrealized legacies, the Olympic Games are insistently prospective and rarely retrospective. We are using this issue to look back at the Winter 2010 Games largely from the point of view of artists and cultural workers at the receiving end of the Olympic and Paralympic agendas. This archive looks a lot different from the mostly sealed records currently sitting in the city archives. There are no meeting minutes or brand protection agreements published here. In the case of artists like Clements, Kwan, Wong, and Roche, their statements are insistently personal, conveying both a sense of exhaustion—at the grind of grant writing and demands for scaled-up artworks and productions—and a sense of resolve: none were prepared to displace their own artistic vision for the benefit of VANOC or their government and business interests.

Urban theorist and activist Libby Porter argues that “displacement is a defining feature of the mega-event” (Porter et al., 395). Mega-events expose host cities to housing crises that through large-scale redevelopment plans result in mass tenant evictions
and increased homelessness. In Vancouver, this extreme social inequality was not supposed to prevail. In 2002 VANOC (then the Bid Corporation) and all three levels of government signed the “2010 Winter Games Inner-City Inclusive Commitment Statement.” Spearheaded by the Impact on Community Coalition, this plan earned Vancouver the title of first “socially responsible” Games. But the multi-party agreement, which included promises such as “ensure people are not made homeless as a result of the Winter Games,” was never implemented (Vancouver 2010 Candidate City 3). On this last count, Vancouver’s Olympic decade saw homelessness increase an astonishing 135 per cent (Delisle), with 1,715 people counted homeless in 2010 (Eberle Planning and Research 1). Most affected were the socially marginalized residents of the Downtown Eastside, as landlords and developers seized upon the Olympic windfall by selling off and converting low-income units (Johal).

Indeed, the 2010 Olympics have arguably only accelerated Vancouver’s ongoing affordable housing crisis—by, for example, helping to tip what potentially might have been the white elephant of the Athletes’ Village in South False Creek into the latest trendy neighbourhood. Notwithstanding other highly visible capital infrastructure projects, like the Canada Line rail link to the airport, or the twinning of the Sea-to-Sky highway to Whistler, this particular example of Olympic urbanism might be the most important—and contested—legacy for Vancouver. What might it mean, then, to take stock of its significance from the materially embodied and always financially precarious perspective of art, culture, and performance? As Cole’s discussion of the fate of one Olympic commissioned durational artwork that sat adjacent to this site suggests, and as the photos of the area by Christos Dikeakos in the slideshow accompanying the online version of this issue further attest, the time-specificity of performance—and its documentation—affects one the critical ability to extend the event horizon of a given mega-event, and to think beyond the obfuscating mentality of “once in a lifetime.” As any artist or cultural producer well knows, you’re only as good as your next show.

Thinking about Olympic legacies in this durational way, it bears keeping in mind an important distinction made by Robert VanWynsberghe, a professor in Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia who was contracted by VANOC (as per IOC guidelines) as the arms-length researcher responsible for writing the Olympic Games Impact (OGI) study required of each host city. In a recent article based on OGI data for Vancouver 2010, VanWynsberghe usefully distinguishes between the costs of “event hosting” (i.e., impacts associated with Games-specific infrastructure, like building a stadium) versus what he calls “event leveraging” (i.e., outcomes associated with longer-term social and economic legacies, that may or may not dovetail with parallel local government initiatives or public policy objectives—by, for example, implementing a community sport participation program in a specific neighbourhood). The key, according to VanWynsberghe, is to find the right method or model to turn immediate impacts (which could easily become potential liabilities) into sustainable outcomes (longer-term community and civic assets).

This means moving beyond a “build it and they will come” mentality that aims at capturing, for example, a tourist bump and/or job growth surge during and immediately following the Games—which, as countless empty stadiums the world over demonstrate, is almost always limited to a fairly circumscribed period. Instead, one must plan for the long term and, as crucially, for a resident population, building this local legacy event horizon into the initial bid itself rather than waiting for it to magically manifest after the Games are over. Turning to artists, who are there helping to produce the “megeness” of the mega-event even before it begins, is a place to start.

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During the final stages of preparing this theme issue, our colleague and friend Geoff McMurchy died. A highly accomplished dancer, visual artist, and artistic leader, Geoff was a critical contributor to the local and national disability arts and culture movement. We will miss him dearly. We are pleased to continue to learn from his insights and experience in his contribution to this CTR issue.

Notes

1 Stop Changes to Access to Work is the advocacy group against the termination of the Independent Living Funding and the scaling back of the Access to Work program. Its national spokesperson is Jenny Sealy. It is precisely the cuts to these programs that explain why Sarah can’t get to her school audition in Bulmer’s Fix.

2 See also Wong’s reflection on the Cultural Olympiad for the website SpiderWeb Show, “Mega Event – Mega Work.”

3 In contrast to VANOC, and its exemption from the province’s Freedom of Information Act laws (which enabled restrictions on key files) (Mackin), many of the London 2012 records have already been placed in the public realm by the UK National Archives, some of them in a dedicated digital space called “The Record.”

4 As of the writing of this introduction, the numbers for the 2015 homeless count have yet to be released by the Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness. However, the previous year’s count showed a marked increase from the time of the Games to 2,777 homeless people in 2014 (Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness).

Works Cited


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