

# GENERATOR AND THE RISER PROJECT: SECTOR DEVELOPERS FOR INDEPENDENT THEATRE IN TORONTO

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## A CASE STUDY: GENERATOR

### What is Generator?

*Generator is becoming a place where artist-driven companies and creators can go to get all the resources they need to self-produce. I think they're unrivalled for being dedicated to helping people figure that out [...] I can't think of a place where people are so focused on that work.*

(Participant in Generator's artist producer training program)

Generator is commonly known as a capacity building and mentoring organization for independent performance makers. Previously focused on theatre, the organization is now, as of summer 2017, highlighting its capacity to include others within the performing arts, including dance and interdisciplinary and culturally diverse practices that do not emphasize one discipline over another. Prior to 2014, Generator was known as the Small Theatre Administrative Facility (STAF), and offered marketing and arts administration services to independent artists and companies at subsidized rates. The renaming of STAF to Generator represented a deep transformation of the organization from being a support services organization that was hired to “do things” for artists and companies, to being one that helps artists and companies “do it yourself.”

For the past two years, from 2015/2016 to 2016/2017, Generator has focused on roughly four areas of activities:

- **Training** — Their flagship Artist Producer Training (APT) program selects approximately eight individuals annually, through a competitive application and interview process, for the

opportunity to be paid a modest stipend (\$1000) for one year while attending classes twice a week at Generator's offices for eighteen weeks. Classes are taught by industry professionals; past instructors have included producers and artistic and managing directors of some of Toronto's large cultural institutions, as well as the smaller, project-based Resident Companies (see below for an explanation of “Resident Companies”). Classroom styles range from workshops to lecture-presentation to facilitated discussion. Following those eighteen weeks, the last semester of the training program consists entirely of a practicum whereby each trainee is placed inside a different professional arts organization to learn about producing “on site.” These placements are sometimes less like a job, and more of an opportunity to shadow, observe and ask questions. Generator also offers periodic public workshops on a one-off basis that anyone may attend at very low cost (\$20 each).

- **Coaching** — Officially, individualized coaching services are primarily for Resident Companies, which are two project-based theatre companies, typically in a period of consolidation or growth, that are given free office space for one year. Informally, APT program participants (current trainees and alumni), are also coached as the need arises. Unofficially, Generator reports that people (beyond APT and Resident Company participants) call them for advice “all the time.” In this sense, Generator operates an informal help line for independents who may not have

somewhere else to turn to for a quick collegial check-in: “Am I making the right decision?” “Is this typical?” “What should I do?” “What would you do?”

- **ArtistProducerResource.com** — Resources created or made available by guest instructors and Resident Companies through the APT program have been culled to populate the first-ever wiki for artist producers. Scheduled for launch in Nov 2017, the wiki is intended to opensource (and crowdsource) the kind of knowledge that APT trainees have been learning, along with budget templates and other resources so that independent theatremakers do not have to “reinvent the wheel” every time someone decides to put on a show.

- **Convening conversations** — To develop leadership, Generator also works in partnership with other organizations, to bring people together for conversations that help advance issues, or that support practitioners, such as when the topic is about “Mid-Career Struggles: How to get your mojo back.” Usually these conversations are live tweeted under the hashtag #UrgentExchange. On more than one occasion, these conversations have been written up in the media for their frank, candid discussion of challenging topics. One example is “The White Guy Shuffle,” which was a conversation on how to change hiring practices in Canada to empower diverse leadership that is reflective of Canada as a society. The “White Guy Shuffle” #UrgentExchange took place in January 2017, after seven prominent artistic-director positions in Canada were all filled by “white men,” over a period of six months. (Three of the positions had previously been held by “white women.”)

Generator is a complex and ambitious two-person organization. During the course of this study, Generator staff were winding down former (fee-for-service) STAF programs while simultaneously refining, fleshing out and starting up newly-established and not-yet-implemented programs

related to and possibly moving beyond the four focus areas listed above. The research process did not include analysis of all of Generator’s many activities.

### **What makes Generator great? What has it succeeded in doing?**

*Generator brings together really smart, hustle-oriented people.*

(Generator Resident company member)

There are very few places in Toronto where one can train specifically to be a theatre producer.<sup>2</sup> As small as the program may be, Generator’s APT program for 8 producers a year may be the largest in the city, possibly in the country, and the only one specializing in training independent “artist producers.” As one APT guest instructor puts it:

*There are leadership programs now, all over the place. They’re useful but it’s not the same. [...] Event planning is not the same. There’s a lot of applicable, cross-pollinating skills, of course, but my understanding of that — doing industrial shows, weddings... It’s not performance. It’s not art.*

And while other arts organizations offer artistic residencies to independent companies, Generator may be the only place in where independent companies can go for organizational residencies.

Generally speaking, the significance of Generator’s sector development work may be described as supporting the development of peer and personal resources, curated communities and conversations, and organizational resources for the contemporary independent theatre company.

### **1. Peer and personal resources, or What it takes to hustle**

A Norwegian study published in 2014 looked at the careers of freelance musicians and identified “an unpredictable future, threats to the family/work balance and significant amounts of external pressure” as key sources of “demands” that contribute to

2 Luminato, a multidisciplinary arts festival, offers a program for one emerging producer per year. Soulpepper Academy’s 2016 – 2018 cohort of 15 theatre artists includes two theatre producers-in-training.

poor mental health among these artists. The study found that “social support” and “adequate personal resources” are important “buffers” to meet the demands of a freelance artist’s life (Vaag et al 2014). Social support includes family and friends, as well as a professional network of contacts to whom one could turn for help, advice or empathy. Personal resources include: “entrepreneurial skills, value-anchored flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity,” and passion for the art. This Norwegian study is a helpful entry point into understanding the value of the totality of what Generator is building up. Generator helps freelance, self-managing theatremakers flourish, by helping them develop their professional peer network and personal resources. As a hub, Generator offers a complex package of vital peer and personal resources: from social support (professionals who understand one’s line of work, who share some of the same lived experiences), to entrepreneurial skills (hard and soft skills), capacity to be flexible in a way that is rooted in one’s deepest values (to be meaningful or worthwhile), tolerance for ambiguity or uncertainty (typically both), and ability to remain connected with one’s intrinsic motivation (desire) to be an independent theatremaker.

## 2. Curating & connecting community & conversations, or Who’s a hustler

Staff interviews generated some discussion of their community - or sector-building activities. As well, public materials (Generator website and social media feeds) were briefly reviewed, which gave more specificity and context for their community-building activities. Some of these community- and conversation-building activities are less formal; some are unusual. One might even say experimental. Examples include:

- [Generator’s vlog](#) (video blog);
- [#UrgentExchange](#) events
- [SLIP](#) — the Summerworks Leadership Intensive Program, of which Generator is a producing partner

The speakers, topics and content across many of these activities are fresh (as opposed to tired, or typical) and present in a smart, savvy, “right on the money” kind of way. The language is current: This

summer, for example, one of the SLIP events was a workshop on *decolonizing performance practice*. A recent [#UrgentExchange](#) conversation, held at the Fringe Festival, was on “*Work/Work Balance: How can we balance what we do for love vs what we do to live.*” When asked about how the organization might impart its method to others for staging frank, open conversations like [#UrgentExchanges](#), former executive director Michael Wheeler suggested:

First, you need people who are on the panel that people are interested in hearing from. So, usually not the usual people that are on panels, and people who might say controversial things. [...] And then the second thing is to sit down with your partners and talk about what are the things that people are talking about privately in bars and after shows but aren’t happening in a public forum?

By curating topics that are being whispered or bandied about in informal settings by colleagues, and pointedly inviting people who are “not the usual suspects” to speak to these topics, Generator is curating and cultivating a culture that feels relevant and edgy to independent theatremakers. Their marketing copy uses a heady mix of upbeat, “ready for a challenge” language. The casual or informal quality to their vlogs and social media feeds builds on this, foregrounding Generator’s scrappy, bootstrapping, “got it, doing it” values and attitudes. The effect might be like a beacon for independent theatre and other performance makers. “*Hey, over here, join in, we’re your kind of people. We know you. We believe in you.*”

*Prior to Generator, I hadn’t had a lot of opportunities to meet like-minded people. [...] APT is for people who are self-starters, driven, wanting to take control of their own careers, and wanting to make positive change in whatever field they work in.*

(Generator APT program participant)

*I felt the residency really worked to legitimize the act of working on theatre every day, as opposed to coffee shops or whatever. [...] You feel like you’re part of something. Like somebody gives a shit what you and your compatriots are doing. You have a home. You’re not just relegated to dark and dusty corners.*

(Generator Resident Company member)

*The camaraderie with companies being in the same space - these companies, we all have a lot in common. We're also all different. We can commiserate and also give advice and learn from each other.*

(Generator Resident Company member)

### **3. Organizational resources, or How to hustle as a company**

Interviews with Resident Companies suggest that for these small, project-based companies, Generator is a “game changer.” Resident Companies are awarded free office space at Generator to help them consolidate around concrete, self-identified organizational goals. Having time and space to consolidate and reflect as an organization, is vital for companies that are no longer “emerging” but operating at the level of the “establishing”<sup>3</sup>:

*Having it allowed us to think in a different way.*

*[It's] changing the way that we make theatre, changing the landscape and reality of independent artists.*

The residency allows the companies to experiment with reorganizing how they work or redistributing how responsibilities are managed. Generator staff are

available on a scheduled and ad-hoc basis to provide advice and guidance around these goals and any other issues that might come up while companies are in residence.

*Within two weeks of approaching [Generator] with what felt like a huge, terrifying crisis, I felt like I was on track to figuring it out and finding resources, and just being reassured that what I suspected wasn't right, was in fact not. [...] If I had been at home dealing with this alone, I may have imploded. [...] I came out of it feeling like I know who to go to, not to solve all my problems, but to help lead me in the direction of solving the problems myself.*

Kristina Lemieux, Generator's executive director, is careful about avoiding “arborous language” about growth and development that would imply these companies are trying to get bigger or mature in a conventional sense. While growth can be an organizational goal, Lemieux suggests that for some, the goal may be to scale back the number or frequency of productions so as to achieve a better “work/work/life” balance.<sup>4</sup> Scaling back or not striving to grow bigger can also mean that the shows a company does mount can benefit from more focus, and result in a higher quality product.

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3 A few interviewees referred to three categories of independent artists: emerging, establishing and established. Borrowing from these distinctions, an “establishing” company might be described as one in which organizational expenses are not all covered by organizational revenues, relying instead, on personal cash and/or in-kind contributions.

4 The phrase “work/work/life” is used by Generator to refer to the common lifestyle for independent makers to have to balance both work that pays the bills, and one's own artistic work, as well as life.

## REFLECTING ON THE CASE STUDIES

Overall, Generator and The RISER Project are largely achieving what they set out to do. Generator is helping to equip independent theatremakers with peer-sourced training, guidance, answers, resources and space to do their work with less “reinvention of the wheel” and more support. Katie Leamen, Director of Coordination and Communications at Generator reports that graduates of their APT program are in high demand as producers and collaborating artists. Generator’s Resident Companies are building competencies and continuing to produce high-quality productions as evidenced by the awards they are winning. The RISER Project is helping independent theatremakers present work on stage and in front of media, industry contacts, and audiences sooner, or in a “bigger,” “louder,” or more fulsome way than would otherwise be feasible. Empirically, at least half the shows in The RISER Project (two out of four) each year receive some form of continued development, when desired by the artist(s), with at least one show each year (25% of shows produced) receiving support or an invitation to remount the production or take it on tour.

How are Generator and The RISER Project working toward success? Some common strategies used by the two ventures include:

**Acceleration:** Strategically investing resources at a critical time in the lifespan of the project and/or career of the individual to help advance the project and/or individual more rapidly or profoundly. New or better jobs or opportunities may come up, but there is inner work too. Interviewees from both ventures spoke to how their experiences (within Generator and The RISER Project) led to their practices changing, enabling deep shifts or transformations in outlook, self-concept, or self-understanding as an artist.

**Immersion:** Providing a deep dive, or a kind of ‘anticipatory socialization’ experience.<sup>8</sup> Placing the

individual and/or project in immediate contact with the world of professional theatre making – facilitating conversations, contacts and opportunities to acquire social and intellectual capital, to learn the norms, behaviours and language, and to be seen or noticed by those with influence and decision-making power.

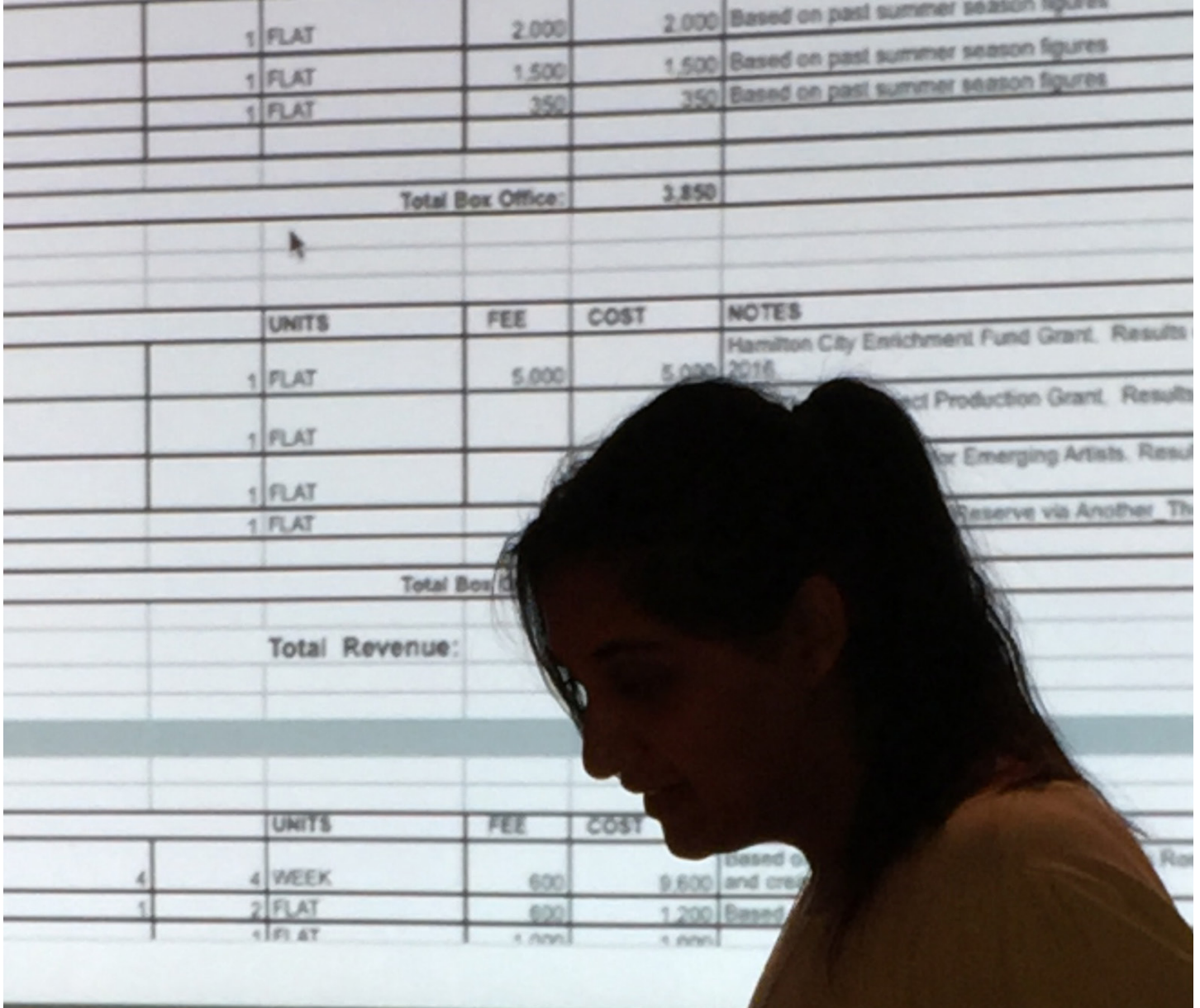
**Coaching:** Working with the individual and with companies through their lived experiences, or providing examples drawn from others’ lived experiences, to guide them, improve awareness, deepen understanding, discuss options and alternatives, ask questions, bring in additional resources and help work toward their goals. Unlike mentorship, coaching tends to be short-term and task-oriented, focused on work outcomes.

**Co-Residencies:** Placing individuals and projects side-by-side in context. That is, in the same context. Co-habiting the same conceptual and working space where cross-dialogue is expected (required) creates a reflective peer group, or a community of practice. This grouping of people and/or projects can trigger self-comparison and comparison by others. To keep the competitive spirit friendly, mutually nourishing, culture is important.

**Culture:** Cultivating and curating for attitudes, customs, beliefs, aspirations, language, rituals and stories that relate to generosity, compassion, professionalism, kindness, open-mindedness, collaboration, peer-to-peer learning, initiative, self-motivation, self-actualization, self-efficacy, gumption, willingness to ‘hustle’, and other elements that contribute to better communities, better neighbours, better sense of self, higher work performance and higher quality of life. Promoting a wide, inclusive sense of camaraderie and mutuality.

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8 “Through a kind of anticipatory socialization, the mobile individual adopts the attitudes, values, and judgmental standards of the class to which he aspires, but does not belong. This anticipatory socialization, so long as the class system is relatively open, serves the twin functions of helping the mobile individual to overcome the subcultural barriers confronting him and of easing his social acceptance in the stratum to which he moves” (Lane and Ellis, 1968)



**Collectivity:** Believing, and *taking the risk to act on the belief*, that together is better — that there are problems that cannot be solved in isolation. That the better future is co-authored all together.

Both Generator and The RISER Project inspire and enable independent theatremakers to take their life and work into their own hands. Many participants expressed a sense of empowerment and a kind of satisfaction or fulfillment at having agency, or in popular parlance, “owning their power.” If what they want is not happening for them, they can *and do* make things happen for themselves. They pick up the pace when they want to.

As case studies, Generator and The RISER Project suggest a new genre of arts leadership. The two ventures represent a hustle-oriented community, a devising community, a community that says “people first,” the new norm being a start-up attitude (“throwing things at the wall to see what sticks”) toward *anything* and maybe everything — art, organization, collaboration, entrepreneurialism and “being evaluated.” Independent theatreland is being developed by a new genre of artistic leaders who will gamely, as Owais Lightwala, Managing Director of Why Not Theatre puts it, “imagine more” around something if the people they are championing feel it is important.

## APPENDIX IV: SURVEY RESPONSES TO GENERATOR'S ARTIST PRODUCER TRAINING PROGRAM

These 'river diagrams' visualize responses to end-of-program survey questions posed to Generator's APT program graduates. To date, there have been seven graduates out of nine students in 2015/2016, and ten graduates out of ten students in 2016/2017. Seven responses were received from each graduating class. The medium purple colour shows the minimum and maximum values entered by APT participants in response to each question. The convention with 'river diagrams' is to look for the areas showing the greatest difference between minimum and maximum values. Also plotted is the average response to each question, marked in a dark purple line.

- Looking at the areas where the greatest difference lies between minimum and maximum values, does the range of responses suggest that, for some, the program is too challenging or not challenging enough?
- What other questions could be asked?
- How might some questions be refined or modified for more clarity? E.g. "The pace of the class was appropriate" might be reworded to read "The pace of the class was too fast." This rewording might produce more consensus and clarity (strongly agree or strongly disagree).



### APT Participant End-of-Program Evaluation - 2016



### APT Participant End-of-Program Evaluation - 2017

