

## **PACTcon 2025: Halifax**

Event: Opening Event, May 21  
Time: 9:00 AM  
Location: Fountain Hall Stage @ Neptune Theatre  
Remarks: Executive Director Opening Address  
Speakers: Brad Lepp, Executive Director, PACT

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BRAD:

I have the opportunity to say a few words and share a few thoughts before we welcome our Keynote this morning.

I'd like to talk to you today about Lumberjacks, Lamaze, and Daffodils.

But before I do that, PACT doesn't get to have very many opening nights. And so, I would like to acknowledge that putting on a conference is a significant investment. It is an investment in your time and energy and resources, as well as ours.

I want to echo Kathryn in thanking our host theatres throughout the conference.

I'd like to thank our partners that have stepped forward to help and yes, help keep the conference as affordable. Thank you to the Government of Nova Scotia, to Blueprint Insurance, Front Row Insurance, VBO tickets, Vectorworks, Young Associates, PAA, The Arts Firm Inc., and Playwrights Canada Press. Please take a moment to say hi to them this week and join me in thanking them.

Planning this conference is a year-round activity, and so I also want to thank our operating support that we receive from the Canada Council for the Arts, The Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council. Thank you.

I want to give a shout out to some special delegates with us this week. We have seven Rising Tides participants, who are early or mid-career arts administrators, who have been participating in a paid mentorship program over the past nine months, and that culminates in their time together this week. We are very excited to have their voices weave into our conversations.

I want to also introduce Angela Simmonds, who will be our active listener throughout the conference. She is an outreach worker, conflict resolution coach, social justice lawyer, politician and consultant, and loves the arts. She'll be a friendly face around this week, and please take a minute to say hello. She is here to help us in our commitment to creating healthy and productive spaces, and so we have also introduced some meeting guidelines that were shared as part of our conference welcome package. If you'd like to get in touch with her, PACT staff and board members have her information.

And finally, I want to acknowledge the year-round work of PACT's Board of Directors, and especially our small-but-mighty staff team. – Alison, Patricia, Ainslee, Panthea, Nathaniel and Darragh.

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If you will bare with me, I'll invite you all to breath in through your nose – get a nice full lungs – then top up with a couple of quick intakes – and exhale. That is called a **physiological sigh** and studies have shown it is the fastest way of addressing stress in your body. A double inhale, followed by an extended exhale. Let's do it again.

We do it when we sleep. Dog's do it. When you are crying you do it instinctively. Of course other things – meditation, vacation, exercise, - those things all help address stress and anxiety, but aren't always practical in the moment.

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My wife says I have taken up sighing lately and calls it my old-man sigh. Little does she know, sometimes I'm not sighing, sometimes I'm just out of breath.

One.

The story goes that there are two lumberjacks. The first lumberjack, younger, stronger, was very determined and dedicated. They arrived early, chopping down trees, pushed on through breaks, had a quick lunch, and was back at it and worked a full long day. The second lumberjack arrived on time, worked hard, but went home for breaks and even went home for lunch for an hour or so, and came back in the afternoon. At the end of the day the first lumberjack couldn't believe that despite working longer and harder, the second lumberjack's pile was bigger. The first lumberjack went up to the competition and said, I don't understand – I put in more hours, I worked just as hard if not harder. While you were at home I was working. How did you beat me? The second Lumberjack said, while you were here working, I was at home sharpening my axe.

Leadership care was something we heard loud and clear last year in Montreal. In our efforts to create more work-life balance for our teams, that often results in more work on our plates. As we empower staff to set boundaries, that same luxury is not afforded to leaders. If a staff person says no, it means someone still needs to do it.

In a meeting last week, this issue of care came up – and a voice said, 'Great, another thing I need to worry I'm doing wrong.'

And I definitely feel that.

I'm guilty, and I know I'm not the only one.

And when it comes to it, I'm not sure what role PACT has to play in supporting a person's individual leadership practice. Does the membership want management tips and tricks? Workshops on self-care? Or is the reality that those who need this most don't have time to attend a webinar?

But PACT is interested in navigating some of those conversations. And because leadership takes all forms and contexts, what might be helpful for some might be less so for others. That's okay, we'll keep trying.

Two.

When my partner and I were expecting our first child, we did the usual pre-natal birth prep classes. We did the exercise of clutching an ice cube. You would hold onto it, and it would sting, freezing the nerve endings in your palm. And we would breathe and do various mental exercises to distract from the pain. And the instructor prompted my partner to think about the water, soothing back and forth, coming in and going out.

My partner immediately rejected that, and dropped the cube. For her, there was nothing relaxing about water – frozen or otherwise. Water is powerful, always moving, life-giving sure, but also harsh and unpredictable. To picture a tranquil stream was to deny the nature of the thing.

And as we prepared for this conference, in a place surrounded by water, we didn't want to deny the nature of the thing. The idea of harbour really landed for me – maybe it was a rough week, I don't recall. Whether your boat is stocking up for an exciting new venture, or is coming in for a much-needed respite, repairs battered from the storm, or perhaps you're bailing water and barely keeping above the surface – we hope this conference can be a harbour for you for a short time. Our sector is powerful, always moving, life giving, but also harsh and unpredictable – there is no point in pretending otherwise. We have been clutching that ice cube for a long time.

Boats are safe in the harbour.

We also know that boats are not built to stay in the harbour.

Your organizations are doing important and exciting things, navigating uncharted waters. That work awaits you. And whatever energy you bring to this week is okay.

Three.

I went on a wet chilly spring walk the other day, through our neighbourhood and park system. It was pretty miserable, but I was trying to get my steps in. And my kid looked around and pointed out the tree – that one is going to be purple, with the softest petals. That one has the giant seed pods that look like snakes on the sidewalk. And that bush – is usually red. And that neighbour's garden is where the daffodils will pop up soon. I can't wait.

It was pretty short sighted of me to look around and see my community that was post-winter – perhaps the winter of my discontent - bare trees, dead grass, and yes, those green bags of dog poop that someone didn't pick up. But that was just the surface. So much was happening, active. The bulbs are already planted. What is growing even now? What is taking form just below the surface. What newness is waiting.

We've done the work of planting in seasons past, we're doing the work of maintenance, taking care, clearing away the chaff, and preparing. And we do that because we know, or at least trust in what is in store. I can't wait.

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When I'm stressed, anxious or uncertain – perhaps the greatest gift I receive is being seen. Having someone recognize that what we're holding is tricky, that the answer isn't obvious, and sometimes just to talk through the situation.

When that happens, it is remarkable how quickly my shoulders can relax. And so I'll take this moment to say, I see you. I see it. I see the effort. It is hard. It is at times impossible. It is also joyous. And you are not alone.

Whether you are here to sharpen your axe, here to rest in harbour, or to plant some bulbs for a future season – we all see you, and hope you find something this week that fills your cup.

And because you are all particularly bad at selfcare, we have a couple of surprises to share with you. A couple of additions to the PACT program. They are offered in the spirit of joy and hopefully might bring a piece of lightness to your week.

Immediately after this session we have two hours for an independent lunch break. During those two hours, We have made arrangements and students from the Canadian College for Massage and Hydrotherapy Halifax will be on site in the Windsor Studio and are pleased to offer you a short free massage. Treat yourself. There is a sign-up sheet at the PACT table in the lobby outside these doors, so take 15 minutes out of your lunch break and sign-up for a few minutes of rejuvenation.

Tomorrow, after our AGM session, for those interested, at 11:30am we are pleased to offer a Puppy Yoga session. Space unfortunately is limited, but if you are interested, please sign up outside in the lobby. I'm assured that the session instructor will go easy on folks, but afterwards there will be some additional cuddle time with the puppies – if you like that sort of thing.

These are a gift – offered in the spirit of a bit of surprising joy. To the CFOs in the room, I want to assure you, that neither your membership dues nor your registration fees have been used to pay for these. So, enjoy them guilt free and if they are of interest for you, please, enjoy.

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I will conclude with the infamous words of Donna-Michelle St. Bernard: 'There is Always Crying at PACTcon'.

That is because we know what we do matters.

I look forward to the next four days together.

My commitment to you is to stay curious, to stay open, to have a sense of humour, and to stay hopeful.

Thank you.