

## **KEYNOTE ADDRESS for PACTcon 2025**

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Good morning, everyone. Or as I've learned to say since arriving in Halifax:  
“Ow’s she goin’?”

Thank you so much Brad and Kathryn for having me. Jeremy, it’s terrific to be in your space. Elder Ann and Mr. Mayor, it’s a true joy to be here on your incredible land.

It’s an honor to be here to share space with so many extraordinary leaders of Canadian theatre. I spend so much of my time in front of legislators, municipal leaders, Secretariats and I’m a weirdo and a theatre geek and today, I feel like I’m amongst my people! Are there any weirdos in here today? Let me hear you!

I bring greetings from south of the border—from Boston, Massachusetts, where the winters are wintry, the accents confusing, and the theatre community survives on grit, grant writing, artificial sunlight, and hope.

I serve as Executive Director of the Mass Cultural Council, the state’s arts agency, and before that, I led two theatres and wrote a few musicals with dancing ducks, reggae singing birds, and characters with the name Garfield, Odie, and Nermal. So yes, I speak fluent theatre nonprofit, which means I am bilingual in possibility and panic.

Can I tell you a little story?

Peering out between two wooden black-painted caged bars into a sea of wiggly public school children, teachers, and parents in NW Washington DC, I took a deep breath. I gripped the splintery set with my little first-grade fingers and delivered a line I cannot, for the life of me, remember. But I do remember the moment. The cafegymatorium fell silent. The world faded at the edges. And then—uproarious laughter. The good kind. The joyous,

belly-deep kind. My co-star Gretal was slapping her thigh in hysteria. The witch, who was staged ass-up in a crudely painted oven, was convulsing with laughter. And something snapped in me.

In that moment, the screaming fights at home, the stress of money and food, and the visits to prison to see my father—all vanished. I was Act Three Hansel. I had killed – the people screamed encore and cheered and threw flowers and cried because of my performance. My mom had to be carried out of the cafegymatorium while she wept – “that’s my baby! That’s my baby!” It wasn’t the other two Hansels – it was my performance that elicited such a visceral reaction. It was, in fact, the most talked about elementary school production of Hansel and Gretal in the late 1900’s!

That was the moment, even in my tiny 6 year old head that I realized theatre had power. A Power to transcend pain. A Power to Transform space. A Power to heal. And since you work in theatre, I’m sure you have your own similar story. We are here today because we believe theatre is essential. Not just an essential art form, but I believe it is an essential health and human service.

In Canada, the performing arts GDP dropped by more than 50% during the pandemic, and while recovery is happening, it’s inconsistent. Audience behavior remains unpredictable. Data from our sector partners like WolfBrown and the National Arts Centre suggests that people are returning for bold, ambitious, emotionally resonant work. People are responding to courage, not just comfort. We are also seeing signals of resilience. Cultural sector GDP actually outpaced the broader Canadian economy for several quarters in 2023 and 2024, likely due to the rebound in film and live music.

So, even though you are doing well, how many of you still feel that the theatre world is fragile? Maybe the world, the non-weirdos, don’t always agree that we are an essential health and human service. And maybe, as we look at our industry’s fragility, we are stuck in our own tragic second act, perhaps, suffering from the problems that we created. In the U.S., over the past few years, nearly two theatres per week are shuttering. Closures are

no longer rare or exceptional or personal failures—they are systemic. Because maybe, “it is the system—not the people—who are failing.” We are a sector built on creativity, yet we often default to legacy models when it comes to governance, finance, and leadership. Innovation can’t stop at the rehearsal room door.

In both our countries, artists remain some of the most educated yet least compensated workers. Here, 52% earn less than \$20,000 from their creative work. In Massachusetts, 28 out of the 36 identified arts disciplines are earning well below the Massachusetts Living Wage. We practice, celebrate, and promote the ideology of the “Starving artist” like it’s a badge of honor. We’re still trying to survive and do great work in structures literally designed for a different century. We cling to systems that reward scarcity over innovation. We defend business models that never worked particularly well—not because they were effective, but because they are familiar.

Often, in times of crisis, we hear, Theatre is dying. Theatre is not dying. This 4000 year old art form is NOT dying—it’s molting.

Let that metaphor guide us for a moment. Molting is messy. It’s uncomfortable. It makes us vulnerable. But it is necessary for survival. We must shed the old skin. Not because we’ve failed—but because we’re growing. Embrace the molt. Shift your brains to the opportunity that crisis offers us.

We must stop measuring success by sold-out runs and start measuring by things like civic impact, mental health outcomes, joy-per-minute ratios. Can we be the Research & Development lab for society’s toughest problems – like housing, transportation, racism, homophobia, ableism, authoritarianism? Can we reimagine our theatres as cultural embassies, not just as a venue to see a play or musical? Can we build theatre for the next generation—not just for the subscribers of the 1990s?

This moment is too complex for minor adjustments. We don’t just need program tweaks or technical adjustments—we need adaptive, radical,

reimagining of our whole business models. Let's not be Kodak, Nortel, or Blackberry and refuse to adapt to changing times. We need to ask: what are we offering, who are we offering it to, how are we delivering it, and most importantly—why?

I know that you are slammed, under-resourced, and afraid of risk, but if we don't get off the hamster wheel of insolvency and do differently, we will be more slammed and under-resourced - creating an even greater amount of fear. Make the room. Outdated business models, lack of tech adoption, inequitable labor practices, and leadership pipelines that don't reflect changing demographics won't go away, they will compound. And they will compound exponentially because the world is moving faster than ever. The industries that struggle the most are the ones who stick to dated systems - go have a chat with brick and mortar retail, higher education, print journalism, healthcare and see how it's working out for them.

I'm excited to see some changes to business models emerging – relooking at the function of our boards and redesigning our marketing, press, and communications to be at the service of community engagement, rather than the other way around. But, in order for us to truly adapt, we cannot hold on to sacred cows. Everything MUST be reconsidered. To become cultural embassies perhaps we have to rethink the engrained idea of season planning. Do the people we say we want to engage know what they are doing in a year or a year and a half? What if we announced a slate of shows that we are considering, pending rights availability - allowing us to be both programmatically and fiscally nimble?

What would happen if we finally dumped exclusionary and fiscally bizarre subscription programs? Is it possible to explore or design new audience loyalty programs in a deeper, more complex way. Ways that are inspired by non-arts based patron loyalty programs. Loyalty programs that exist in airlines, coffee shops, hotels, streaming services, etc. While some large institutions have record highs in subscriptions (which may work for them because of their revenue models), others are exploring values-based affiliation which translates to loyalty beyond ticket purchases. Because

affinity is value – as proven time and time again by other industries. Would it be better to redesign audience engagement models from a place of strength rather than cash flows or whims of legacy patrons.

All of this requires you to use the best tool you have – Imagination and creativity. As you tap into those critical professional development tools, you may have to outsource knowledge from other sectors – like the business world and science. I know 'ROI' and 'supply chains' don't exactly stir the artistic soul. But what if tools from the business world—like Lean strategies or customer segmentation—could be reimagined as dramaturgy for your organization's sustainability? Not a threat to your creativity, but a framework to protect it. What if optimizing your rehearsal process saved just enough time and money to hire that second ASL interpreter? What if looking at your audience data helped you uncover a community you didn't even know was waiting for you? Growth doesn't have to mean selling out. It can mean selling more people on your mission. Scale doesn't have to mean Broadway—sometimes it means 5 more high school students in your lobby. Other sectors—tech, even sports—have cracked the code on reaching broader audiences, diversifying revenue, and measuring impact. We can borrow their tools without giving up our soul. We can stay weird and be smart, by digging into our fine tuned professional skill sets of Imagination and creativity.

I want to break something down for us. Imagination is seeing the world differently. Creativity is bringing imagination to life. Art, design, technology are products of creativity.

Creativity is your superpower. It bends energy, heals trauma, provokes empathy, builds bridges, helps us laugh in the darkest of times, and makes us shake booties! It's the power that allows us to see what isn't there—and make it real. What if we imagined and created organizations designed not around sustainability, but around generativity? Shifting from a focus on simply sustaining an organization to actively creating intense value: new ideas, relationships, models, and outcomes that feed the broader ecosystem.

“Sustainability keeps us afloat. Generativity moves us forward.” Let’s stop aiming just to survive—and start building things that outlive us. The Iroquois people and a practice among many native and indigenous people is known as the "Seven Generation Principle."

It emphasizes long-term thinking, responsibility, and stewardship. Decisions made today should be in service of the next seven generations—ensuring that what we create, build, and protect will benefit people far into the future.

We are not using our creative power enough.

Let me pause and say: I’m not asking you to abandon tradition. Reimagining doesn’t mean losing our roots. It means being brave enough to evolve. To find new forms that honor our past and meet our moment. For example: What if we made joy a strategic priority? At the Mass Cultural Council, we’ve done just that. Doctors in Massachusetts are prescribing twelve doses of arts and culture to their patients that come with a companion ticket and paid for by 3rd party payers, including some insurance companies, medicare and Medicaid. In Massachusetts, we’re working across state government to embed arts in healthcare, education, climate action, economic development, housing, and transportation. Our cultural districts are tackling street safety and job creation. We’re now helping employers include the arts in employee benefits. Why? Because the value of the arts go deep, and we, the stewards of art, have to think and behave differently.

This also means that the Government must become a design partner, not just a handout dispenser. We’re far too addicted to the grant cycle. Other sectors shape policy—they don’t just apply to it. Tech, life sciences, energy—they write legislation, help set zoning rules, build training pipelines. They engage with government beyond funding and advocacy is a core function of operations for organizations in their industry. In the arts, it’s often an afterthought, especially when there is a threat of funding. We leave possibility on the table by only focusing on funding.

If the arts want to be seen as essential, we have to show up like we're essential. We must embed ourselves in every plan, every budget, every department. What if theatre companies were treated like civil engineers—brought in to plan and design communities?

And while we're at it, let's stop pretending that artists don't need business training. Every theatre degree, every art degree should include business courses - like legal, advocacy, budgeting, marketing, negotiation, and pricing - so that our artists don't show up to contract conversations at a deficit. The market knows our business literacy - and hence the perpetuation of the "starving artist trope". What if we taught artists not only how to do eight shows a week—but how to read a city budget. How to build power. How to capitalize and commercialize their artistic skills. Let's try weird ticketing schemes, pilot new pricing models, bring in data scientists and cross sector partners.

Despite everything, Canadian theatre artists made work in parks, on porches, over Zoom, in basements, from hospital beds. You said, "We're not done." That's not just resilience. That's rebellion through beauty.

We are not failing. We are molting. Embrace your molting.

You are the stewards of stories. You decide what gets told, who tells it, and who gets to listen. That is sacred power.

So be bold architects of new models. Host dance parties in your lobbies. Serve breakfast theatre. Invite transit engineers to rehearsals. Co-design your slate of shows with a teenager and a grandmother – with the people you say you want to attract. Track legislation in housing, economic development, climate, transportation and secure sponsors to amend legislation that doesn't include the arts. Partner with your mayors on the value of embedding creativity into every government sponsored workforce development program. Make sure everyone running for election has an arts

platform. Think like an engineer. Work like an artist. Dream like a movement.

Design design design play play play...do what we do best and bring in people from outside of our world into our spaces to help us see the things we can not see – the business leaders, entrepreneurs, futurists, social scientists, engineers. Let them come join your weird party and intervene and interfere. As we know in theatre, the magic is in the conflict and the tension. Lean in. Lean in hard. And use the rest of 2025 to build a new theatre complex. Let PACTCon 2025 be the beginning of a new covenant - a contract to fix what isn't serving us and share all of your new designs at PACT2026.

Repeat after me: Our worth isn't in the systems we inherited  
(HOLD/REPEAT)  
—it's in the impact we create. (HOLD/REPEAT)  
That's where our value lives.

And the reason why you have to do this deep, self reflective, and scary work is because there are so many ACT THREE Hansels that need you to not entertain them, but to save them.

Thank you for letting me into your beautiful country, your beautiful moment, your beautifully molting world. And...please don't build a wall.  
Thank you.