

April 19, 2022

A statement from the Board of Directors of The Jessie Richardson Award Society

It has been a difficult few years for everyone, and the performing arts have faced unique challenges during this time. One of the biggest challenges faced by the Jessies has been the engagement and involvement of the theatre community on our juries, committees, and Board of Directors. To that end, the Board of Directors has made the difficult decision for the Jessie Awards to go on hiatus and pause all jurying as of May 1, 2022.

We truly believe that the Jessies bring value to winners, nominees, and the community at-large. However, we also know that many remarkable and worthy artists have felt marginalised, oppressed, and unrepresented by the Jessie Awards over its history. As the current Board of Directors, we take these concerns seriously, and have been working over the last few years to try and implement changes to prevent further misrepresentation. The work over the past 3 years includes:

- In January and September 2020, we circulated two surveys about proposed changes to, and the future of, the Jessie Awards;
- In March 2021, we invited representatives from professional theatre companies in the Metro Vancouver area to meet about the Jessie Awards;
- In June 2021, we held an open invitation town hall with paid facilitation by an experienced equity consulting group;
- From these community consultations, and with the support of the equity consulting group, we revised the *Guidelines for the Jessie Richardson Awards* in July 2021 to:
 - Require anti-bias, anti-racist, anti-oppression training for anyone who represents the Jessie Awards in any way (board members, jury members, affiliated organizations or people who select Special Awards);
 - Revise performance award categories to be gender inclusive, ensuring all LGBTQ2S+ community members feel free to participate without compromising their identities;
 - Create a new Division to better support emerging artists and give them opportunities to win Jessie Awards and parlay that into more access and acknowledgement from granting bodies and the community; we also created this new Division to make jury service on the Small Budget Division less onerous and more accessible to a range of people.
- We have regularly sent out calls for new members for the Board of Directors, with the most recent formal call happening in September 2021.

We know that serving on a Jessie Awards jury is time-consuming and we are deeply thankful to so many for their jury service over the years. It's also true that in our society, structured by white supremacy, capitalism, colonialism, ableism, and patriarchy, the ability to offer that time is more

frequently available to people who hold privilege in these systems. Year after year, volunteers on the Board of Directors and Jessies Review Committee have to reach out through personal and professional networks to try and add enough folks to diversify our juries. We feel that we cannot continue in a paradigm where the time commitment that jury service demands is not available to every community member that the Jessie Awards aims to serve.

We wish there were more immediate ways to fix these issues within the current structure of the Jessie Awards. Do we need grants and donations to compensate jurors? Could post-secondary programs support their students in jury membership through course credits? Could the number of productions jurors are required to see be reduced? Should voting be made more public? Should juries be made smaller, or larger, to allow for any or all of these changes? Addressing the next steps forward requires time, feedback, and, most importantly, involvement from a range of community members.

We know it's possible that folks who have been historically excluded from the Jessie Awards may not feel called to give their energies to its future. We know that upholding the Jessie Awards might not feel like the right avenue for community involvement. We know that asking for a wider range of Vancouver theatre makers' participation in making the Jessie Awards happen is complex and loaded. But, as the current Board of Directors, we also do not want to uphold existing power structures by pretending that the buy-in for the Jessies is diverse and representative enough for it to continue as-is.

In addition to the juries, the Board of Directors and its committees are entirely made of volunteers. We produce the Jessies in our unpaid time, with shoestring budgets that barely break-even year-over-year. We balance the cost of expensive trophies while keeping ticket prices manageable with ensuring accessibility in spaces large enough to host our community while prioritising the costs of anti-oppression training with ongoing engagement to ensure that we are truly serving our community. All the while, we are not succeeding in getting the industry-wide buy-in needed to change the Jessie Awards into something more equitable, more representative, and more sustainable for the future.

We love theatre and all the people who make it, but this love is not enough right now. The future of the Jessie Awards needs to be assured by a diverse group of community members so that the Jessies might more fully represent the range of folks who make theatre in Vancouver. Do you, or your organisation, have some time and energy to make the Jessie Awards what it could be? Please reach out to us at info@jessieawards.com and we will work to connect everyone who is willing to take this on. If you have any other thoughts that you'd like to share, we would love to hear that as well. We hope that there is opportunity in the future to transform the Jessie Awards into the inclusive community celebration we believe it should be; a celebration that is for the community, by the community. We look forward to a future where this organisation continues to evolve in honouring the diverse constellation of artists making theatre in Vancouver.