

Here and Now
Final Report - Publicity
By Jen Cressey
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Overview

Due to a run the lasted a full month, the publicity campaign was necessarily sustained after building strong momentum around opening night. Abiding by the rule that a person requires four media hits to be convinced of a subject's value, I worked with Manjot Bains to make the campaign as ubiquitous as it was compelling.

Specific targets included; the South Asian, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Latin American communities, as these ethnic groups have all experienced media profiling as fomenters of gang culture.

We also worked to reach families and youth, schools near the show venues, MPs, MLAs , social service providers and the theatre community.

The early project work of the Outreach Co-Ordinator (Dafne Blanco) continues to be an important tool in supporting the traditional publicity campaign. The monthly newsletter provides contact with supporters and equips them with information that is then spread by word of mouth. Also, many contacts are cultivated in aid of launching the project, finding participants, and galvanizing support. Many of these contacts assist in ensuring that a project is well and widely known.

The Message

Here and Now worked with members of the Indo-Canadian community on an issue that had been described by the media as being "theirs". From the earliest conversations about the project, there was a fear that the people who weren't from the community would consider the subject to be outside their experience, and not attend. With this in mind, it was necessary to create both a short slogan that emphasized the commonality of the play's themes, and also a longer message that walked media representatives through the logic behind the slogan.

The slogan was "We all share the problem. The solutions are Here and Now". The explanation delineated that yes, we were working with members of the Indo-Canadian community, as they had been targeted by the media, but the stories onstage were common stories. At that point, examples were often useful. Intergenerational conflict is not exclusive to any one community, and something that people readily understood.

This message was repeated in all communications, and resulted in a generally positive response. In most cases, we were able to frame the discussion around common issues, rather than supposedly foreign, divisive concepts of cultural difference. Only a couple of media people had difficulty with the idea. In particular, Camille Bains from the Canadian Press was adamant that the gang issue was a

racial one, and Priya Ramu at CBC Radio went so far as to ask if we felt that “enough Indo-Canadians were in the audience”.

Assistance from Manjot Bains

More than simply an assistant, Manjot Bains executed a very successful concurrent campaign in the South Asian media.

Manjot’s extensive knowledge of the South Asian media was invaluable. Her awareness of the reach and target audiences of various outlets allowed for appropriate messaging, prioritizing, and eventually lead to complete saturation.

Successes

Media Call

We enjoyed what was by far the most successful media call I have seen. Eight different broadcasters booked in advance to attend, and two more showed up unannounced, in response to a media release sent that day. This proves the worth of sending a media release to newsrooms and assignment desks the day before and early morning the day of a media call. Broadcast decisions are often left to the last minute, making it important to stay in the minds of decision-makers.

The cast performed five different scenes, at least twice each to allow for capturing of different camera angles. This took thirty-five minutes, and then the remainder of the hour was spent conducting on camera interviews. One crew was conducting very long interviews, causing us to go 10 minutes overtime. This was not a serious problem.

Poster and Flyer Distribution Squad

As always, Perry Giguere was employed to put up posters around town. Having developed a relationship with Headlines, he understands how we conduct our campaigns (begin indoor posting three weeks in advance of opening, and build to street saturation for opening week) and where posters should go up (everywhere!). Perry’s work was supported by a number of people who reached specific locations that he does not service.

After the workshop was finished, many participants were eager to help spread the word. Along with several volunteers who were excited about the project, participants reached many places the poster pro doesn’t. Manjot and I identified and divided the desirable locations, and were very happy with the results.

As well, Harry Wong volunteers for various cultural organizations, distributing posters and flyers. We supplied him with 80 posters and about 500 flyers, which he then took to all university and college campuses, as well as community centres and meeting places in the suburbs. His work was spotted early in the campaign, and as he reaches more far-flung areas, I was happy to supply his request of four free tickets as a way of thanking him. As it turned out, he brought two more paying

customers with him, and enjoyed the show so much, he helped with word-of-mouth as the run continued.

Transit Shelter Advertising

The City of Vancouver has a program that allows for free posting in transit shelters, and as a non-profit, Headlines is eligible. I have not taken advantage of this on past projects; at \$65 each, I found the cost of printing the giant, weather-resistant posters prohibitive. As it turns out, the value of the advertising is well worth it. When we asked people how they heard about the project, the transit shelter ads were mentioned at least 25% of the time. They also generated a sense of excitement about the project, and reinforced the media campaign at a bona fide street level.

Quality and Depth of Coverage

“Improve the quality and depth of coverage” was stated as a goal in the final report for *Practicing Democracy*. This has indeed happened, with several national hits, and a strong profile in the Vancouver Sun that followed the process over two articles, as well as reviews in the Straight and the Globe and Mail and unprecedented coverage on CBC Radio. There was a feeling, for me at least, that publicity was moving up a notch, and that people were taking Headlines more seriously.

Why would that be the case? Certainly, there are ever-increasing numbers of journalists who know Headlines, relationships that have been carefully fostered over the history of the company. But really, those relationships come to life with a hot topic. There is a saying in newsrooms: “If it bleeds, it leads”, and the topic of gang violence is a bloody one. It has also baffled politicians and pundits who are eager to articulate a simple solution. By providing a grassroots voice, cast and participants of *Here and Now* were welcome interview subjects.

As well, there were several high-profile interviews (including Shaw’s Urban Rush and provincial shows on CBC and CKNW Radio) where the presence of Artistic Director David Diamond altered the focus of discussion, and added depth to the analysis. The value of this kind of publicity goes beyond “putting bums in seats” by actually serving the spirit of the project in the realm of public discourse.

So what’s left? As Headlines’ profile accumulates and expands, local and national glossy magazines are the next practical target for coverage. Conversations with Vancouver Magazine yielded no result, but were encouraging. Ken MacQueen, the one-man Vancouver Bureau of Maclean’s, included *Here and Now* on a short list of stories sent to Toronto for vetting. With continued effort, including concurrent releases and follow-up with eastern head offices, success can be expected.

Pitfalls

Print vs. Broadcast, Part 2

As mentioned in the final report for *Practicing Democracy*, I have witnessed a swing in the concentration of coverage for different media on different projects, and *Here*

and Now has been no different. It seems that there is a response based on a dynamic, or sensational visual appeal which leads to more broadcast coverage versus the more conceptual appeal that leads to print analysis. *Here and Now* enjoyed an exceptionally strong presence on television and radio, but did not garner much advance print, a major profile in the Vancouver Sun notwithstanding. Fortunately, print coverage increased after opening night, and by the end of the run there had been articles in all the mainstream outlets, except the Courier and the Westender.

Is it possible to predict and sidestep such concentrations? Perhaps. One can also bear the trend in mind when pitching to one medium or another.

Local Media and the Civic Election

It is worth mentioning that the production overlapped with a very closely contested civic election, which had an impact on the amount of ink expended on *Here and Now*. The Georgia Straight's Arts Editor, Janet Smith, expressed frustration that she was unable to give space to the production, as there was a pressing need to provide comprehensive coverage of the election. The Courier's Allan Garr also expressed interest but was preoccupied with scrums at City Hall.

As Headlines' work is issue-based, there is an opportunity to approach both the arts and news media. There will always be competing shows and competing issues, hot news that could grab an assignment editor's attention and pre-empt a scheduled visit or interview. However, if it is possible to avoid local political races (every three years, in mid-November), we would have one less competitor for the finite amount of Vancouver newsprint.

Relationship of Publicity to Attendance

Between outreach and publicity, we were very pleased to hear unanimously from our contacts that awareness of *Here and Now* was very strong. People heard the message and saw images associated with the play everywhere they went. The wide reach of broadcast media had brought excerpts of the play into people's living rooms. And the project arose as a subject of conversation whenever gang violence was discussed.

The houses for *Here and Now* were respectable, especially considering a month-long run. But we never felt that the critical mass of awareness we were hearing about was translating into a critical mass of ticket sales. This was difficult to face on a daily basis. I can only explain the discrepancy with conjecture. On one hand, perhaps the venues reinforced the idea of the topic belonging exclusively to a specific community. On the other, Manjot suggested that theatre was unusual activity for Indo-Canadians. Either way, after people saw the show, they were extremely enthusiastic, and eager to tell others about it.

One of the difficulties of the work is that it must be seen to be appreciated. So it follows that our best strategy continues to be maintenance of contact with those who know the work.

Conclusion

The mainstream publicity campaign was a successful, weighted toward broadcast coverage. We had our first appearance on national arts station Bravo!, and national as well as provincial hits that served the dual purpose of promoting the show and the company. The next step is to tackle magazines, and seek more international attention.

The correlation between publicity and attendance is somewhat difficult to pin down. Certainly, we should always work to get the maximum possible attention for the work. But other strategies are, and must remain, necessary to get people into the theatre. Group rates and two for one nights are effective for audiences who find ticket prices - which are already below market value - prohibitive. Our trial run selling tickets online yielded some results. There is merit in discussing other ways to get people to go from awareness and enthusiasm to committing to a ticket purchase.

Media Log

Print

Canadian Press

- Article by Camille Bains, publication TBA

Courier

- Sunday, November 20 – blurb featuring webcast

Georgia Straight

- Thursday, November 10 - Straight Choices
- Thursday, November 24 - Kathleen Oliver review

Globe and Mail

- Friday, November 25 – Tim Carlson article/ review

Langara Voice

- TBA – review and interview with Jen, Seth and David

Metro

- Friday, November 25 – Tai Abell article

Milenio

- Article

Organic Press, based in USA

- December issue – Article by Adam Ward, and donated ad

The Province

- Thursday, November 17, Stuart Derdeyn article
- Tuesday, November 22 - Jerry Wasserman review

Surrey Now

- Saturday, November 26 – Tom Zillich article
- Wednesday, December 28 – Gurpreet Singh opinion piece

Vancouver Sun

- Saturday, October 22 Peter Birnie article
- Saturday, November 19, Peter Birnie review
- Thursday, November 24, Critic's pick with photo
- Saturday, January 7, 2006, Kim Bolan article on report

Westcoast Families

- November - blurb

Radio

CBC

- Wednesday, November 2 — On the Coast – Priya Ramu interview with Seth and Jagdeep, 5:40 pm - 10 minutes
- Saturday, November 12 – NXNW – Eillean Power feature – between 7:30 – 8:00am
- Friday, November 18 – Early Edition – Margaret Gallagher ticket give-away
- Tuesday, November 29 – On the Coast – feature by Jen Moss, followed by Priya Ramu interview with Kashmir Besla
- Friday, December 2 – BC Almanac – Mark Forsythe interview with Seth and Balinder, four tickets donated in support of Food Bank Drive
- Monday, December 12 - Sounds Like Canada – Produced by Cori Howard – Kathryn Gretsinger interview with David
- Tuesday, December 13 – On the Coast – Priya Ramu interview with Seth (and Wally Oppal)

CBC Radio-Canada

- Thursday, November 17 – French language interview with Seth

CJSF

- Saturday, November 26 – La Re-Vista Un Programa Consentido - Interview with Amorita

CKNW

- Monday, October 24 – Michael Smyth interview with Seth and David, 8:45pm
- Monday, November 28 – Michael Smyth interview with Jagdeep and David, 8:00pm

Co-op

- Thursday, November 10 - La Bus de las Siente – Ramon Flores interview with Jen and Amorita
- Saturday, November 19 – Redeye – Review by Laura Lamb
- Friday, November 25 – Wake up with Co-op - Steve Rosenberg interview with Jen

Radio India

- Tuesday, December 6 – News piece by Gurpreet Singh. Repeated at least four times.

Television

Bravo!

- November 18, BravoNews feature by Kerry Hittinger

CBC

- Thursday, November 17- Local News – 11pm
- Tuesday, January 3, 2006 - The National – Producer, Cedric Monteiro - inclusion in feature on gang violence

Channel M

- Friday, January 6, 2006, 9:30pm – News Punjabi Edition – interview with Kashmir Besla

CityTV

- Wednesday, November 16 and Thursday, November 17 - CityPulse News
- Sunday, January 15, 2006 – Colour TV – Prem Gill interview with Kashmir Belsa and Jagdeep

Fairchild

- Community events announcement in English and Cantonese

Shaw

- Thursday, November 17, repeated November 18 – News
- Monday, December 5 – Urban Rush – Mike and Fiona interview with David

Email/ Web

- Alliance for Arts Faxnet
- City of Vancouver Community Events webpage
- Email announcement through Tom Sandborn's networks
- GVPTA mass email
- Mass email sent to all City of Surrey workers for closing weekend
- Mass email to City of Vancouver community centre recreation workers
- Rabble.ca
- Vancity internal website
- Vancouverplays.com review by Jerry Wasserman
- VCN listing
- Web counterparts of dailies, weeklies, television and radio

Display ads

- Bus shelter ads in Vancouver and Surrey
- Courier
- Fifth Avenue – projections
- Georgia Straight

- Theatre programmes at the Firehall, Vancouver East Cultural Centre, and Performance Works
- Westender
- Youthink

Sponsorship

- CBC – Inclusion in community events broadcasts
- Co-op - 30 second promotional spot played at least 30 times
- Westender – 40% discount on advertising

Miscellaneous

- Unaddressed admail was delivered to all homes and businesses within an eight-block radius of the Ross Street Temple
- Opening night invitations were sent to over 400 people.