

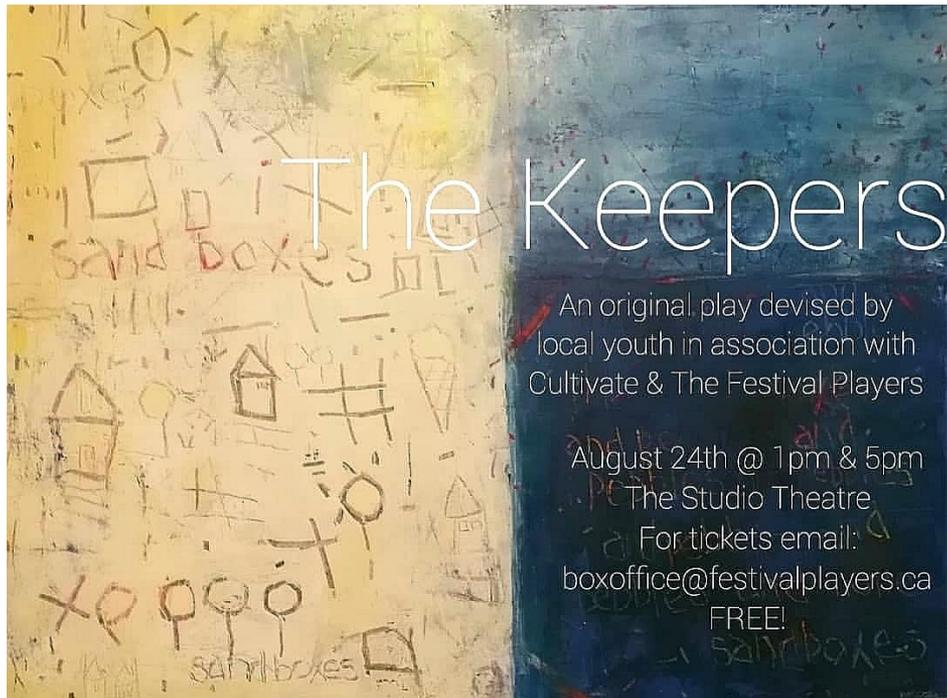
The Keepers

Play Incubator Camp (PIC) in Prince Edward County (PEC)

August 2019

A collaboration between Cultivate and Festival Players

The Keepers is an original play devised by a collective of local youth alongside professional artist-educators. They created this piece at the Festival Players Studio Theatre in Wellington, Ontario over two weeks in August 2019, premiering on August 24th.



The Collective

Brendon Allen (lead artist)
Grace H.
Kate J.

Amanda Merpaw (lead artist)
Duncan S.
Julianna T.

What is play incubation?

We use the term *play incubation* to describe the work of devising a piece of theatre over a fixed period of time.

Devising is the process of collaboratively creating a play from scratch, usually building around a prompt the collective explores together, such as a theme, question, character, or text.

The collective engages in movement, mime, improv, sound, set design, lighting, direction, writing, and adventuring together to generate all elements of the play.

“We all got to write and contribute. We did stuff together, by ourselves, we worked in the theatre space a lot and in the lobby a lot. It was a combination of sitting and writing and working on our feet with someone else writing...We went back and forth between ideas, edited them, over the two weeks.” —Julianna

Water: the initial provocation

Our creative process started with *water* as a prompt.

This inspiration originally came from the timing of our work: our two weeks together as a collective overlapped with Wellington Water Week.

It also came from wanting to connect to an important natural element here in the County.

We also felt compelled to talk about the environment by the increasingly urgent conversations about the climate crisis, and the role young people like Greta Thunberg have in activism and change.

How did we create this piece?

Early inspiration

With water as our prompt and only two weeks to create the play, we knew it was important to engage with as much inspiration as we could as early as possible in the process. To figure out what story we wanted to tell together, we:

- Went on walks around the neighbourhood
- Took photographs of water sources
- Spent time at the beach with our feet in the water
- Shared our memories of water
- Read picture books
- Brainstormed experiences of water related to global warming

“The water walks were inspiration for parts of the scene or ideas... I put my feet in the water a lot.” —Grace

How did we create this piece?

Choosing a story

As we talked through our inspiration points, we were drawn to the creative potential of telling a story that speculates about what it would be like to live in the County if it faced major flooding and water contamination. As we engaged with our early provocations, we kept coming back to questions like:

- Why is water important to us as individuals and to us as a community?
- How are we taking care of the water around us?
- Are humans doing enough to ensure the future of water?
 - Are humans doing enough to ensure the future of animals, and plants?
- What would happen if the County experienced major flooding?
- What would happen if the water around us was contaminated?
- What role might teenagers play in this future flooded/contaminated world?
 - What role might teenagers play today?

“I was feeling that if we don’t fix ourselves it’s either gonna end up something like this play or we’re just gonna be done. I’m worried. We either need to figure out a way to actually save the world or find another world. Like, it’s urgent...What would happen if humanity doesn’t save itself? What if global warming isn’t stopped? What would we have to do to survive afterward? So we wanted to write about it so people could think about that.” –Duncan

“It started with dead fish. We went off writing in the beginning. We kind of evolved off the fact that there could be dead things in the water after going to the beach and finding a bunch of dead birds...It’s unfortunate that that’s where our minds went because it proves that that’s what’s really happening in the world and how bad it’s been getting.” –Grace

“We were on our first water walk and we walked close to the water tower. We were talking and thought, people could live in the water tower. Then we went to the beach and thought about the lighthouse. First there were zombies. But we refined the ideas.

Global warming is happening right now in the world. There's the flooding in Prince Edward County. We have water in people's backyards, they're flooded, sandbags have been filled and they're just sitting along the shoreline everywhere. It was like, what is happening right now in the real world? What can we bring from the real world into our play?” —Julianna

How did we create this piece?

Writing and worldbuilding

Once we realized how much energy we were investing in these questions, we felt the momentum in telling a speculative story of a possible future where the County faces a serious water crisis. At that point, we developed the substance of the story through:

- Character development (sketching, writing, moving, improvising)
- Improvising scenes and story between characters
- Writing descriptions and dialogue collaboratively
- Researching water issues and effects of the climate crisis in the County
- Interviewing community members for their memories of water and perspectives on water issues in the County
- Imagining the fundamental aesthetics of the world (sketching, foraging, photographing)

“We were improvising scenes together, and when we were talking, if it sounded like a good idea, we would write it down. If it didn’t, we would suggest things we could do to improve it... if the story wasn’t working one way we’d try to resolve it a different way until it eventually worked out.”—Kate

How did we create this piece?

Refining and rehearsing

Once the major elements of plot are in place and we've built dialogue around it, we worked to hone the characters and setting. As we rehearsed, we talked through which choices worked and which didn't, shifting the piece as needed. In this stage, we talk through and finalize:

- Costume choices
- Set elements
- Prop design
- Music
- Flow and pacing

Why create this way?

We engage in devising together because young people have the capacity to be storytellers and artists. They're also often meaningful activists and agents of change. Their ideas and voices matter. When we engage in theatre by providing a pre-written script and directing them through it, we tell them that other people have stories to tell, and their responsibility is to work toward that story. In this theatre model, we tell them that the story to be told is theirs, and their responsibility as creators is to themselves, each other, and the audience.

“The best part of writing something from scratch is having a character that is exactly how you wanted it. You get much more in tune with your character because you can actually choose what you want to do with them. You get to say, I want my character to say this, and then you get to decide when, why, where, how.”—Duncan

“You feel more connected to the role than having an assigned role. I created her. It’s like she’s my baby. It’s something you produce. It’s weird to look back and be like, I created that. Instead of in a show where I just acted that part and multiple people have done it before. It’s just me, I’m the first person who played this character. And it’s a great feeling.”
—Julianna

Community-based arts: a sense of place

Where we live and how we live there are fundamental elements of our identities. The stories we tell and the art we make are also intimately connected to place, especially when the initial prompt for the story is a natural resource that surrounds this place. We wanted to tell a story that was deeply rooted in a sense of the physical and emotional geography of the County. This meant that we:

- Explored the community on foot
- Wrote and rehearsed scenes in outdoor spaces
- Interacted with community members using those spaces
- Shared our experiences and knowledge of the physical space of the County
- Researched interesting or meaningful local spaces online, via maps, and in conversation with locals
- Grounded our story in specific elements of local geography

“We wanted to keep it local because we didn’t want audience members thinking it was something that happened elsewhere and you don’t have to worry about this. It’s set in Wellington here and you do have to worry about this because it is an actual issue.

There was one article about the sandbagging that PECI had done. My class was part of it. And there was a whole article on it, on how we took time out of our work schedule to help the County.”—Grace

Community-based arts: a sense of people

A key element of our process was to connect with community members to contextualize our story through local perspectives. Since we are talking about a part of the natural world that is relevant to everyone and an issue that could affect everyone in the community, we wanted to incorporate those voices in our piece. To engage in this, we:

- Generated questions about water memories, experiences, and access
- Interviewed a variety of community members
- Transcribed excerpts of the interviews
- Incorporated interview excerpts into the script (verbatim theatre)
- Refined the script with the perspectives of local community members in mind

“I sort of got nervous just asking people randomly for questions. But over time it ended up being really fun and I got some really good answers from people. I’d definitely feel more comfortable going up to someone and asking questions now, starting a conversation.”—Kate

“It’s fun going word for word repeating what people said. But it can be difficult, the way people speak is different than how plays are usually written, there’s stumbling and filler words. It can be hard to perform that.”—Duncan

The role of devices

Technology is a ubiquitous part of how we communicate, how we engage with the world, and, often, how we create. It was important for us to engage intentionally in this reality than to ignore it altogether or try (and fail!) to control it.

We collaboratively set norms for our device use so they would be channelled as creative tools while allowing us to stay present and focused.

In the studio space, our collective used their devices to generate a shared script in real time, and to work from that script as they improvised and refined the story. The collective will also use their devices to guide them during the performance itself, as memorization was not an expectation (they did just finish writing the script a few days ago!).

“It was very strange at first. The fact that we have devices as scripts in the show. I’m used to being given a script and told, memorize this. But this allows us to update it, to change things. It gives us permission to improvise. It definitely helps. It’s a lot simpler. We can change a scene without having to reprint the entire script...Though it does get difficult with managing all the props and costume at the same time for my character.”—Grace

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