

Overfunding the Arts

Canada is a fascinating, scary country. However, lately, I am more scared than fascinated. Tuesday morning, on CBC radio's "Arts Report" I heard - oh, the sorrow! - a funereal male voice moaning over a tear-moistened script. He informed the nation that Toronto's ten-acre Harbourfront project (which we learn has national significance), holds 4,000 events, and attracts 3,000,000 people every year, would soon close due to a 30% cut in its federal grant. Almost \$9 million of Harbourfront's \$17 million annual budget comes from Ottawa.

Correction. I spoke Canadian. It actually comes from millions of distant taxpayers who will never see Harbourfront, travels through Ottawa (where it is reduced by a sizeable commission), and flows on to grant-seeking artists and their ilk in Toronto, who for some unexplained reason cannot interest the public in paying them voluntarily. Therefore children's art, jugglers, ballet, modern dance, an authors' love-in, baseball games, poetry readings to other poets, all, all, we are told mournfully, will be gone forever.

Forgive the cynicism, but I smell special pleading. I smell the employees of a massively government-subsidized broadcaster weighing in with considerable muscle to slug it out on government-monopoly airwaves, with government ministers who are accused of cheapness (because twenty years too late they have reluctantly learned that subsidizing art contributes to our national debt).

This "arts" scenario is repeated daily by thousands of funded groups who regularly threaten to rally in their own cause. Too bad. Because Canada has some super artists in every field. But very few make it on their own. Most of them are snorting at the public trough. So their success can rightly be called artificial, because when government aid disappears, their art disappears. They are arts parasites.

Alarmed Canadian author John Metcalf bemoaned this in the '90s, when he wrote that

"The big commercial publishing houses are subsidized. The smaller literary presses are subsidized. The still smaller regional presses are subsidized. The writers are subsidized. The literary critics are subsidized. Translation is subsidized. Publicity is subsidized. Distribution is subsidized. More bizarre perhaps than anything else, the Writers Union of Canada is subsidized."

But the notion that government ought to subsidize art is a bad one that inevitably leads to poor art, half-empty theatres selling underpriced tickets, publishers warehousing books no one wants to buy, and hordes of deluded struggling artists who soon learn to tailor their artistic programs to please the granting agency.

To a great extent, the whole notion of public arts is the intellectually tattered brainchild of the world's statists, who still harbour deep anti-capitalist sentiments. Free markets are based on the

exchange of inferior art for money only, goes this purist thinking. Millions of happy people who see schlock like Phantom of the Opera? Why, they need exposure to real art. Real artists make art not for money, but for the ethereal pleasures of art itself. Get market pressures out of the way, and then real artists can create freely, unpolluted by crass commercial limitations or cravings. So Act One, Scene One, is short: Hug government.

The paradox here, of course, is that in order to appeal for support, arts groups such as Harbourfront must convince us they are popular. Over and over we are told about the 3,000,000 visitors to Harbourfront.

So at once, my mind says, what's wrong with asking for 10 or 15 bucks apiece, the price of a movie with popcorn and a coke? Somehow, that works out to \$45,000,000 at the top end which, less the budget of \$17 million, would leave a profit of \$28,000,000. Not bad for one season. But instead of figuring this out, these spoiled artists start to cry. They will shut down completely September 15! They won't cut fat, fire incompetents, reduce expenditures, tailor production to meet demand, or just charge \$5.50 per head admission to break even, but shut down the whole ten acres. Pout, pout. It's pathetic. I say let'em stew in their own juice. Great art springs from great pain.

Meanwhile, check out people like Max Reimer, Director of Huron Country Playhouse in remote Grand Bend, Ontario. His Playhouse One theatre, stuck out in a country field, receives no government funding. "Not a nickel." The theatre has 614 seats, runs 129 shows per season at 94% capacity, and sold 67,000 tickets last year (at an average \$22). Grand Bend has only 600 residents, so the theatre must draw patrons from many miles away, 60% from London, a long 45 minute drive on a dark night.

Canada "is more than moose, mountains, and mounties," says Max. "Top Canadian artists can be found in commercially successful productions all over the world. The good ones don't need government. C'mon up," he adds, "It's the field of dreams of up here!" You bet. Here's a final insight into this scary nation and its policy of subsidizing art: The separatist Parti Quebecois, tenaciously dedicated to dismembering Canada, recently published a book entitled *Quebec In A New World*. Inside the first page is a paragraph acknowledging "with thanks" the financial support of the Canada Council.

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