

## **ARTS NOVA Bulletin**

13 October 2008

### **The Arts Do Matter**

The day after Halifax's kickass Rally for the Arts, the Saturday Globe carried a photo from the event. Right there on page A2 was a picture of Zuppa Circus's Susan Leblanc-Crawford, on stilts, holding up a big VOTE ARTS sign.

Unfortunately, the surrounding article was an appallingly ill-informed column by Globe regular Christie Blatchford. Titled *Arts matter, but does Big Brother have to pay the tab every time?*, Blatchford's piece began as follows: "It would be ridiculous if Stephen Harper was so inarticulate or so misunderstood that those of us who like him were left to interpret what he means."

She then proceeded to do exactly that, offering her

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### **Arts do matter, but do reporters have to get it wrong every time?**

by Christopher Majka  
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In her apologia for Stephen Harper (Arts matter, but does Big Brother have to pay the tab every time?) and his derisive view of the arts published in the Globe and Mail (4 October 2008) columnist Christie Blatchford gets it wrong in almost every respect.

Although the Globe and Mail ran a photograph accompanying her article taken at the huge "Vote Arts" rally in Halifax the previous day (attended by circa 600 people), the Globe & Mail failed to provide any reportage of this event, in which speaker after speaker, from every sector of the arts community and cultural industries, voiced their fury and indignation with Stephen Harper, his government's cuts of \$44.8 million to the arts, and his callous characterization of the arts as a "niche issue."

Instead of informative reporting of this event, the Globe and Mail published Ms. Blatchford's self-confessed apologia for Stephen Harper. Although columnists like Ms. Blatchford are evidently given latitude to propound personal opinions (i.e., "Blatchford's Take") on page A2 of the Globe, is it really the Globe's place to be publishing concocted and conjectured excuses for the conduct of Stephen

Harper's very own translation from Harperese. In essence, she argued that artists are far too dependent on government funding, insufficiently engaged with the marketplace, and out of touch with public taste. She offered the Canada Council website as evidence.

To anyone who knows the cultural ecology of Canada, Blatchford's apologia was a clear demonstration of her ignorance of the subject and her laziness as a journalist. In order to set the record straight, Halifax writer, journalist, and arts activist Chris Majka submitted the following opinion piece to the Globe and Mail. So far, the Globe has not seen fit to publish it.

Harper?

"I don't think that ... Mr. Harper ... was attempting to diss the arts or drive a wedge between artists and their countrymen," wrote Ms. Blatchford. "Rather I believe and hope that what Mr. Harper was grappling with was the notion - pervasive in Canada - that Big Brother must be the *only* funder of the arts ... "

Aside from the propriety of a major Canadian publication undertaking apologies on behalf of a political leader (and full marks to Ms. Blatchford for being upfront in confessing that she likes Stephen Harper), Blatchford gets it utterly wrong on the facts. Big Brother as the *only* funder of the arts? Does Ms. Blatchford know anything about arts funding in Canada? A 2007 study commissioned by the Canada Council, the Department of Canadian Heritage, and the Ontario Arts Council [footnote 1], found that Canadian consumers spent \$25.1 billion on cultural goods and services in 2005, over three times greater than the \$7.7 billion spent on culture by all three levels of government.

To facilitate an even clearer comparison, and focusing just on the performing arts, Canadian consumers spent \$1.2 billion in 2005 on this sector. In 2003 Canadian federal investments in the performing arts were \$207.9 million, provincial ones \$171.3 million, and municipal ones \$23.6 million [footnote 2]. Thus, even aside from corporate funding, foundation and individual donations, membership fees, and other sources of revenues, Big Brother Conservative Harper provided less than 13% of the funding for the performing arts.

In fact, in a 2004 summary of arts funding in Canada, the Council for Business and the Arts found that only 8% of the \$3.0 billion in revenues for arts organizations in Canada came from the federal government [footnote 3]. Thirteen percent came from provincial sources and 6% from municipal ones – a total of 27% from public funds. Although the Canadian government spends only \$4.73 per capita on arts funding (compare this to \$24.36 per capita in England), this same report notes that the arts sector is second only to sports and recreation in Canada in terms of self-reliance, earning over 50% of its revenues through fees for services and products. Big Brother as "... the *only* way for art and the arts to thrive?" Blatchford is about as far off base on this as it is possible to be.

Blatchford also suggests that "every aspect of (artists) lives is subsidized by their countrymen" and that this is unnecessary. The Canadian taxpayers investments in culture bear a rich harvest. Over

598,000 people work in what is a \$40 billion a year industry according to the Conference Board of Canada. Compare this to \$211.2 million in annual subsidies to Atomic Energy of Canada Limited (AECL) which employs 4,000 workers. Is there any aspect of the nuclear industry in Canada that is not thoroughly subsidized by the Canadian public?

Blatchford goes further, accusing government grants of being "incestuous" and "far removed from merit." Does she know anything at all about the rigorous peer-review systems of the Canada Council for the Arts [footnote 4] and other arm's-length arts councils across country? Their principal criterion is artistic excellence. Incestuous and removed from merit? Utter poppycock. Peer review based on clearly articulated principals, rigorously applied on the basis of excellence is the same principal used in science, in both grant applications and scientific publications. I'll leave it to readers to judge if the body of science is to be deemed as incestuous and removed from merit.

One of the few places where Blatchford does get it right, is in the final sentence of her column: "Art matters, period." So does journalism and reportage. If Blatchford had started from her conclusion, had left Stephen Harper to make his own apologies (or fail to do so), and had actually learned something about arts funding in Canada, she might have written an article that could have informed readers rather than misleading them.

*Christopher Majka is a writer, journalist, scientist, and a proponent of the arts. He is an inaugural Mclean-Hunter fellow in arts journalism at the Banff Center of the arts, has written for many national and international publications (including the Globe and Mail) and has worked with many arts organizations in Nova Scotia.*

#### Footnotes

- (1) Hill Strategies Research. 2007. Consumer Spending on Culture in Canada, the Provinces, and 15 Metropolitan Areas in 2005. Statistical Insights on the Arts, Vol. 5, No. 3. Available from [http://www.hillstrategies.com/docs/Consumer\\_spending2005.pdf](http://www.hillstrategies.com/docs/Consumer_spending2005.pdf).
- (2) Canada Council for the Arts. 2005. Comparison of Arts Funding in Selected Countries: Preliminary Findings. Available from: <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/NR/rdonlyres/9C37F2C4-FB69-47C9-8227-EC8C46CAEACF/0/Comparisonsofartsfunding27Oct2005.pdf>.
- (3) Council for Business and the Arts in Canada. 2004. Snapshot of Arts and Culture in Canada. Available from <http://businessforthearts.org/surveys/downloads/ArtsFundersSummary.doc>.
- (4) Canada Council for the Arts. 2002. Peer Assessment: How the Council Makes its Decisions. Available from <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/aboutus/PeerAssessment/gq127234205403281250.htm>

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