

Arts N.S.: Do it right

By CHRISTOPHER MAJKA
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I commend the provincial government's appointment of a steering committee to help set up Arts Nova Scotia, Nova Scotia's new independent arts council. To assist in implementing this, the government has selected a quartet of extremely experienced and capable individuals.

Leah Hamilton was the former treasurer of board of the Nova Scotia Arts Council (NSAC) and is one of the co-authors of the Nova Scotia Cultural Action Network's extensive study of the creative economy. Paul Caskey of Live Art Dance brings a wealth of experience as a producer of contemporary dance and is a board member of the Legacy Centre for the performing arts project. Chris Shore is respected throughout the province for his stellar work at the helm of Theatre Nova Scotia. And Pam Birdsall, the MLA for Lunenburg, brings both artistic acumen as a long-time professional ceramist and political insight as an MLA to the mix.

Their collective abilities and commitment to the principles of arm's-length funding for the arts augurs well for the future of Arts Nova Scotia. Kudos to the government for this excellent selection.

I encourage the government and the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage to give the committee the widest possible scope in terms of determining the framework of this new arts council. Having waited nine years in the artistic wilderness since the Nova Scotia Arts Council was scrapped by Rodney MacDonald, it is now important to get it right. There are two central principles.

First, the new arts council must be at arm's-length from government, with its own enabling legislation, board of directors, policy priorities and programs that it controls and administers. It must control its own budget and be free to make decisions based on principles of artistic excellence and not political expediency. And it must deliver funding programs to the full spectrum of professional arts organizations (excluding, of course, the cultural industries) and individuals in the province.

These are the core principles under which arts councils throughout Canada, North America and the world operate. Without such powers, it would be a puppet entity, an "arts council" in name only.

The second central principle is that Arts Nova Scotia must have an adequate operating budget in order to fulfil its mandate. The NSAC began with an initial budget of \$1.5 million, that was slated to double over three years. Instead, it shrank annually, creating many problems and inequities that dogged the organization throughout its existence.

In 2011, we need to do it right and begin Arts Nova Scotia with a budget of no less than \$3 million. If we want to see it achieve its purpose, we cannot hobble it before it takes its first steps.

Christopher Majka is chair, Nova Scotia Cultural Action Network.

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