

## So, Why Are the Arts Important?

by Brenda Berck

During the various talks I give around the community—no matter what the topic of the talk—someone always asks some version of the question, “Why are the arts important?” Depending on the audience and the theme of the gathering, my answer varies somewhat, but it always includes some mention of how the arts teach us to see things in new ways, and of how the arts mirror our experience. Sometimes I talk about the ways in which the arts are good for business; at other times, about the ways the arts contribute to life-long learning and to lifelong enjoyment.

I had offered to write an article for *Arts Access* on the importance of the arts, but found that my thoughts kept turning to the Constitutional discussions which were happening at the same time. So, to begin, I want to address the question: What do the arts have to do with the Constitution? The simple answer is, a lot! The arts help us understand what it means to be a British Columbian, as opposed, say, to being an Albertan. Sometimes we find words for naming these qualities of identity (mountains, ocean, Westerners) but sometimes, ordinary words aren't enough and we turn to poetry or drama, paint pictures or choreograph dances that are informed by the British Columbian Westerner in, Canadian West experience. Others refer to the ways Canadians are affected by their geography; yet there are of course other elements of our identity—age, gender, class or ethnicity—that are more difficult to articulate, especially for those of us who are not creative writers. So again, we turn to music, dance, theatre, the visual arts, either as a substitute for words or as a complement to those verbal expressions.

The arts also help us to understand what we, as British Columbians, have in common with other Canadians. Some of the qualities we share with Albertans, for instance, are the mountains and the fact of being Westerners; when other Canadians, it might simply be being non-Americans. With others in the world, it might be less geographical and based more on human, social, economic, gender or age issues. Sometimes the qualities we share are concrete and nameable; other times they are ineffable, and best expressed through metaphor and nonverbal forms.

There are therefore two main ways in which the arts inform the Constitutional discussions. First, the arts help us as British Columbians to identify who we are and what we mean when we use that label. They also help them at the Constitutional negotiating table understand what that phrase means. And, second, when arts groups and individual artists tour the country, they can help other Canadians understand and experience how they differ from, and are similar to, British Columbians. As we come to better understand each other's artistic expressions, we have a greater sense of what it means to be Canadian. These are some of the reasons I believe that culture should remain a federal responsibility.

These Constitution-centred examples are some illustrations of what I mean when I

said, at the outset, that the arts help us to see things in new ways. Other personal experiences include:

**Theatre**—Earlier this year, I saw the Robert Lepage/Marianne Ackerman production of *Alaménouide* (the Huron name given to the British actor, Edmund Kean) at the National Arts Centre. It gave me a stunning and visceral experience of one point of Canadian history. The use of Mohawk as well as French and English provoked some new insights into the role of language in communication. The experience left me tremendously excited, so that when, a few months later, I had an opportunity to see Marianne Ackerman's *L'Affaire Taruffe*, or *The Garrison Officers Rehearse Molière* in Montreal, I seized it with relish. There I discovered Theatre 1744, whose mandate is “to create theatre which speaks to a contemporary Quebec audience through projects involving anglophone and francophone artists.” As with the Ottawa production, the play was based on events in Canadian history and was delivered in French and English, with the third language in this instance being Gaelic.

In a different way, the Vancouver Playhouse's production of Afton Fugard's *My Children! My Africa!* built on my personal experience as a student and my professional experience as a school-teacher, to give me an understanding of a quite different educational circumstance. The production featured some fine performances which, among other things, reminded me of how much more powerful it is to see violence in one's imagination, rather than on stage. And, *Haunted House Hamlet* at Presentation House certainly changes one's school-based notion of what Shakespeare might have to do with our 20th-century lives!

**Dance**—The recent Knowledge Network series, *Point of Departure*, had two particularly memorable dances. One piece, *The Fall*, was choreographed for a dancer who had been left paraplegic after an onstage accident. The program gave a whole new level of meaning to the phrase “movement through dance.” Another, by a Belgian choreographer, had the dancers in bulked-up costumes so that they all appeared to have fat bodies. They were able to move gracefully nonetheless. Balanchine was probably turning in his grave, but I loved it! And I'm sure that every viewer was startled into recognizing the assumptions we all make about dancers' perfect bodies.

These are all vivid illustrations of the ways in which art can move one to see things differently. Other effects are more subtle, and take longer to rise to one's consciousness.

The significance of the arts to business is also quite subtle at times. Aside from the obvious fact that arts audiences are also consumers, there is, to my mind, the more significant issue of how the artistic imagination can affect business decisions. Firms that brainstorm about who they are and what they might do have often found it enormously helpful to consult an artist as part of their deliberations, for example. The artist's different way of approaching the particular issue generates new ideas that otherwise might not have come forward. A recent issue of *Business in Vancouver* suggested that newspapers need to “hire the bright, creative ir-

reverent writers and celebrate life and news as an artform,” given John Mais-bett's (*Megastrends*) identification of the ways in which newspapers' functions are changing. Other ways in which the arts have an impact on business include the extra cost-effectiveness of a mixed use facility that includes an arts facility.

Even these few illustrations identify ways in which the arts have significance in our lives. And I haven't even touched on the excitement, passion and increased self-esteem that comes with engaging directly in making art, music, dance, theatre! That will have to wait for another article.

Brenda Berck is the Cultural Development Officer for the North Shore Arts Commission. She has been an avid arts spectator all her life, especially in the areas of visual arts, music and theatre. Her life as a dancer began with ballet lessons when she turned 40 (her gift to herself).

## Regional Cultural Facilities Study

by Brenda Berck

In the last issue of *Arts Access*, I wrote about my consulting experience with cultural facilities planning as a way of describing the kinds of questions and issues that I expected would be addressed in the Regional Cultural Facilities Study. This study is currently being carried out for the North Shore Arts Commission by Cornerstone Planning Group. And since December, I have been writing information updates both in the Arts Commission's monthly newsletters and in the quarterly bulletins of the two North Shore municipalities. My goal in writing these articles is both to inform the community of some of the details of the work being done and to describe this work in such a way that other organizations might consider undertaking similar activities where appropriate.

For example, I wrote that organizations involved in such planning should have a mission statement, for this acts as a point of reference for discussions about the kinds of activities that organization will and will not undertake, and therefore, the kinds and amounts of space required. Such statements also clarify what dis-tinguishes similar organizations from one another. Both Presentation House and the North Shore Arts Commission have recently been discussing their organizational missions, even though only Presentation House is considering its space needs.

Another study activity was a work session that involved a wide range of people—elected officials, representatives of various cultural groups, facilities and related agencies, and planners—in identifying priorities and possible directions. At such meetings, people who normally don't work together find themselves making unexpected partnerships.

The Arts Commission publication *Art Matters* ceased publication last fall when changes to *Arts Access* allowed for the possibility of an occasional column for the Arts Commission. However, later this summer, when there is a great deal more to report on the Facilities Study, the Arts Commission will produce a special issue of *Art Matters* devoted entirely to the Study and the issues it raises and identifies.



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