

Arts & Entertainment

Arts play big part in shaping community: speaker

By **STEPHANIE THIESSEN**

The Champion

All over the world, the arts play an important role in shaping and defining a community.

Naturally, this is true in major metropolitan cities that serve as renowned tourist destinations. Think London, known for its architecture and theatre. Or Paris, where the visual arts are highly revered. In Rome, opera is celebrated, and the list goes on.

But it's also true for smaller towns and cities, where the arts are just as important and often quite plentiful. Think, oh, Milton, for example.

Unfortunately, many people don't realize the importance of the arts in everyday life, and the arts community is held back instead of encouraged.

It's up to those involved in the arts to change that.

That was the message given at the recent annual general meeting of Arts Milton, where drama teacher and show director Ron Cameron-Lewis was the keynote speaker.

"Only artists and supporters of the arts can change the public perception of the importance of artistic expression in daily life, and that's the job of each of us here tonight," the Mississauga resident told the audience.

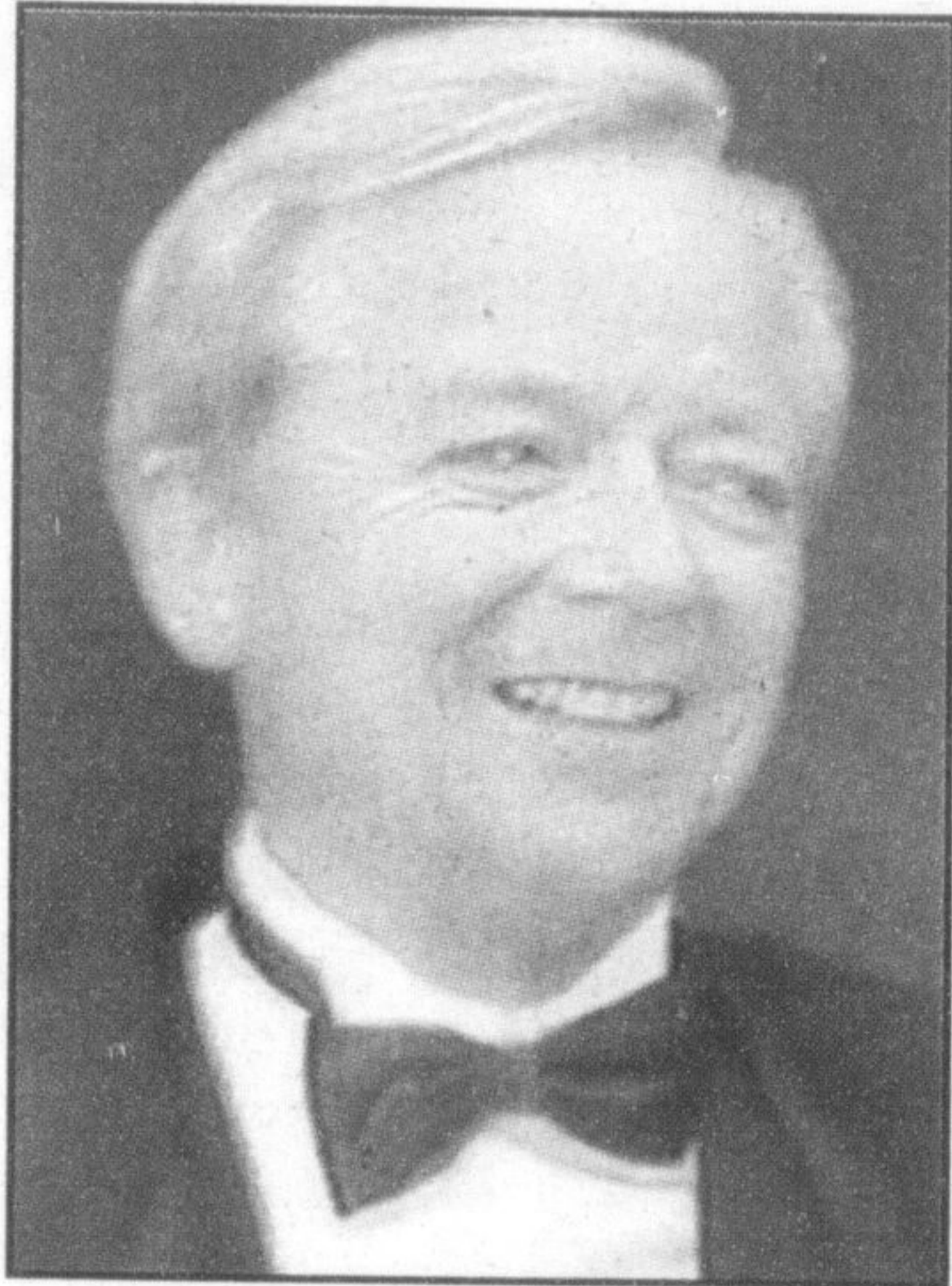
For more than 30 years, Mr. Cameron-Lewis has taught acting and directed shows for the music theatre department at Sheridan College in Oakville. As well, he has taught and directed for the joint Sheridan/University of Toronto at Mississauga (UTM) theatre and drama studies program since its inception 15 years ago. And his textbook on acting technique is in its third edition.

In 2004, he was awarded the Maggie Bassett Award by Theatre Ontario for his sustained contribution to theatre in the province.

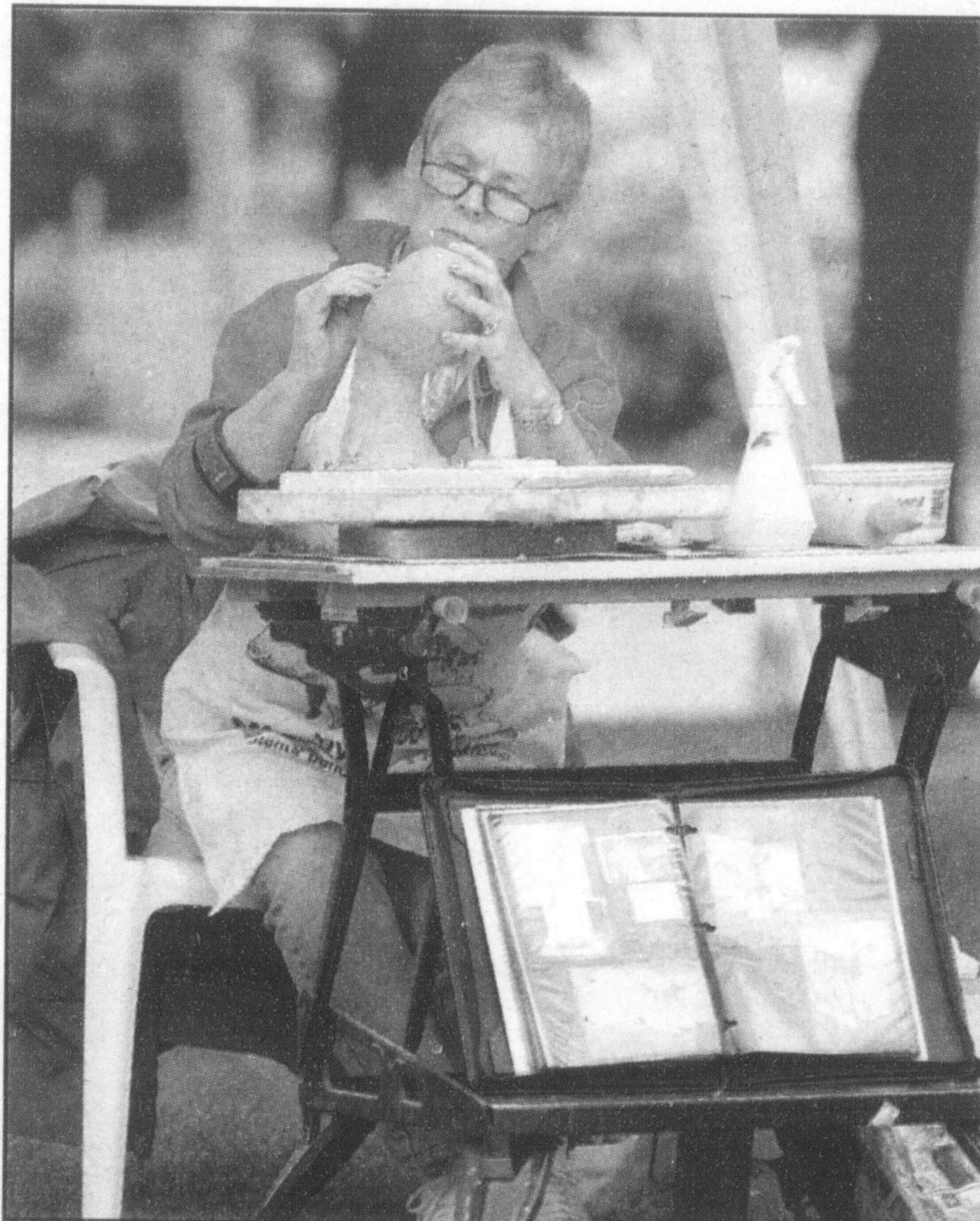
So if there's anyone qualified to address what some see as a downplaying of the arts, it's Mr. Cameron-Lewis.

In general, he told the Arts Milton crowd, more people attend arts functions each year than sporting events, but the perception is the opposite.

"Why? We're too polite. If you go to a concert, the musicians don't suddenly tear off their white ties and tails and break into fist fights. So we can't compete with the emotional outbursts of a



Ron Cameron-Lewis



File photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Sculptor Nancy Cuttle works on a piece during Art in Victoria Park. It's events like this that Ron Cameron-Lewis says help define a community.

hockey game," he said.

He touched on the frustration many in Milton's arts community feel about the delay of a long-awaited arts centre, which isn't expected to become a reality until after 2009.

"You have new ice hockey rinks, but if you don't provide facilities, too, for artists, you'll imbalance the attraction that Milton can offer to new residents," Mr. Cameron-Lewis said.

The importance of the arts in the educational system was another topic he addressed. As program co-ordinator in the music theatre department at Sheridan College, he said there are three to four times more dyslexic students in the program than in the general population.

That, he said, is because many students who can't express themselves in conventional ways — and therefore fail to succeed academically — "turn to singing, dancing and acting to express them-

selves."

"This is all the more reason why communities need to provide support for the arts," he said.

He added that the arts generate money for communities, with things like ticket sales and dining at local restaurants.

Arts Milton president Greg Nelson said Mr. Cameron-Lewis was invited to speak at the annual general meeting because he knew he'd be able to convey the importance of looking at the big picture when it comes to the arts in a community.

Although a facility for Milton's arts community is necessary, he said, members of Arts Milton need to focus on what will happen inside its walls once it's built, and convey the importance of the arts — not just an arts centre — to the town.

He said he agreed with Mr. Cameron-Lewis that arts activities have a trickle-down effect, stimulating other non-related businesses and contributing to the local economy.

"Arts and culture are viable and a necessary factor in the development of a town and the economy in the long term and short term," Mr. Nelson said, adding, "It's a message that's often taken for granted and put on the back burner."

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