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An arts festival for all the 'ordinary, working people'

Culture Days

Adam McDowell, National Post

Presented by



In a September 2008 comment that has fostered lingering bitterness within the arts community, Stephen Harper contrasted artsy types who attend "rich galas" against "ordinary working people," whom, he suggested, don't particularly care if cultural subsidies aren't as high as the gala-goers would like.

If the sector were to craft a positive response, it might look a lot like an initiative called Culture Days, a cross-country arts festival with programming yet to be determined, set to debut next September with the aim of bringing Canadians and their local cultural institutions into a cozier relationship.

"The overall vision is to enable more Canadians to feel at home within their arts institutions," for example with free, open-door events, said Antoni Cimolino, general director of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival and chairman of the initiative's steering committee. "We often see the arts portrayed as something that is elitist, whereas in fact, right across the country, we have people who take part in choirs, who have sons or daughters in music or dance lessons, who themselves read books or go to plays or movies. It's very hard to find Canadians who aren't involved in some way in the arts.

"It's important that politicians and opinion leaders in the country realize that the arts are about every Canadian. It's something we all do."

For the record, Cimolino insisted Culture Days is "absolutely not" intended as a rebuke to the Prime Minister. As a point of fact, it has been in the works for around 18 months -- since well before Harper's gaffe, in other words.

Cimolino said the initiative is actually an effort to build on the experience of similar localized programs, including Alberta Arts Days, the second annual edition of which took place in September and involved 571 events; spOtligh, which involves the Ontario cities of Cambridge, Guelph, Kitchener, Stratford and Waterloo; and Les Journees de la culture, which has taken place across Quebec over the past 12 years and which Cimolino said has been a particular inspiration to Culture Days.

"What they do is to open up the doors; they allow the public to meet the artists and see how they

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An arts festival for all the 'ordinary, work...

work, to get a glimpse behind the scenes. Events are very often free. All these events are promoted on the same weekend and it encourages [people] to get out and get to know their art institutions," he said.

The day-to-day co-ordination of Culture Days is being handled from Montreal by David Moss, president of zicatelARTS Management and Consulting and formerly head of Opera de Montreal. He said developments are at different stages of progress in different parts of the country, with local task forces set up and running in most provinces and the Yukon. The loose organization, which Moss and Cimolino called a "movement" of arts organizations great and small, is preparing to release more detailed plans early next year.

Culture Days will likely entail shifting cultural calendars around to pack as many activities as possible into one especially well-publicized extravaganza lasting at most a few days.

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