

VANCOUVER ARTS WEBSITE

The problem

Coverage of Vancouver arts events by major media is on the wane.

Less than a decade ago, Vancouver Sun had a dedicated staff writer for classical music, visual arts and sometimes even for dance. Now they have sporadic freelance coverage. The Province's downward spiral started earlier and took longer but is still of consequence. The paper lately flirted with its past as a comprehensive source of arts coverage by engaging Jerry Wasserman as a regular freelance theatre critic, but that experiment ended earlier this year.

Television coverage of the arts is erratic at best. Right now there's no one like the CBC's Dale Drewery or CTV's Peter Grainger regularly attending to what's important. The free sheet 24 Hours recently cut all of its surprisingly good local arts coverage, and neighbourhood weeklies are also cutting back. Cash-strapped CBC Radio's limited local airtime can hardly fill the gap, especially as it tries to broaden its reach in an increasingly competitive and fragmented media landscape.

The Georgia Straight continues its stalwart role, but its space is shrinking. A city with Vancouver's pretensions needs more than one reliable source of broad arts coverage.

These circumstances brought a dozen arts groups together on May 8 at the invitation of Vancouver photographer Alex Waterhouse-Hayward. They came to discuss whether they could address the shortcoming through a new website.

The solution

The internet provides an increasingly accessible and economical model for arts coverage. As the medium becomes more pervasive and the technology more advanced, more and more arts-goers are using the net for information and ticket purchases. Yet some worthy efforts to capitalize on this have not developed the critical mass required to become significant and reliable contributors to arts awareness or to our civic conversation on culture.

Now is exactly the right time to change that. In fact, it will happen regardless, as nearly every arts organization is wading into the new medium and independent arts websites increase in number. The only question is whether the growth will happen in a focused and effective way that capitalizes on the potential.

To truly succeed, the effort needs to harness collective energy, exploit what's different about the internet, and aim for something truly preeminent. It needs to be interactive, highly visual, and draw on the best creative and analytical talents the city has to offer. If it's done right, an omnibus Vancouver arts website could become a model for a different kind of media – one that's community-based and accountable in a different way than the profit-driven large corporations where some decision-makers are increasingly remote from local cultural interests.

Many arts organizations want to see a new internet alternative. Audiences, too, have an appetite for something different. Experiments such as Plank and Jerry Wasserman's own website, which provide smart reviews of local theatre, and Tyee Books, which focuses on books from and about B.C., have showed promising audience interest.

In order to effectively capitalize on the appetite for something new and the lessons of past efforts, arts groups should work together through a common agency to develop funding for an omnibus Vancouver arts website.

Ideally, such a website would be an arms-length enterprise funded through a non-profit or charitable agency such as the Alliance for Arts and Culture's Bridge society. The project should build a broad audience with an entrepreneurial approach, but at the same time its managers should remember that a broad audience is built by being equitable and inclusive.

The next steps

Potential government and foundation funders would likely be very supportive of creating a comprehensive, entertaining, thoughtful, and useful source of cultural information in Vancouver. The launch of such a site will provide the best opportunity to raise money from these sources. To obtain that, arts groups must present a clear and consistent case to those funders that such a site is needed to build audiences, promote cultural tourism, and foster the smart critical conversation that is essential to elevating our cultural standards.

That case should consist of a persuasive description of the problem and the opportunity, and a clearly outlined plan for the development of an arts website that will address those issues.

This could include:

- A model of community control that will serve as an international example of how media ownership can be diversified.
- A clear assessment of whether to proceed independently or partnership with an existing internet-based or more traditional media organization.
- A financial plan that provides for diverse sources of funding, from government, foundations, patrons, advertisers and readers.
- A standard of editorial quality and independence that ensures the coverage is intelligent, entertaining and honest.

The confluence of circumstances may never be more favourable to the development of a new media model that serves the arts in Vancouver. A focused effort now by arts community leaders to create an innovative, community-based form of media ownership could have profound consequences, across Canada and elsewhere.