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LOOMING B.C. ARTS FUNDING CUTS HURT

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TRUTH BE TOLD, the "Spotlight" feature is my favourite section in *EQ*. At the magazine's inception, I nicknamed it the "pretty pictures" pages – a dedicated space where Equity recognizes innovation and creativity within its membership and unique people and spaces across Canada. The content on these pages is always upbeat and we try to illustrate it with beautiful and artistic images.

Executive Director Arden R. Ryshpan and I were excited to hear that *Hive 3* had been selected to be part of the 2010 Cultural Olympiad. I attended *Hive 2* in Vancouver in 2008, and I thought it was a project with inventive content and great photos too, so you guessed it, the perfect Spotlight feature.

We drafted an article about the 12 *Hive 3* companies working on their different (and I mean vastly different – if 2008 was any measure of what to expect) 10 to 15 minute performance pieces all to be presented simultaneously in a large warehouse. The article was intended to capture the creativity of the site-inspired, installation-based theatre that had so originally inspired me.

But things changed.

Throughout the fall I watched in disbelief and increasing alarm about the looming arts and culture funding cuts in British Columbia. Was a provincial government really going to cut 92% of its funding over two years?

Funding virtually wiped out

By late fall, the human cost of the cuts became impossible to ignore. B.C. Equity members peppered every exchange with tales about cancelled projects, reduced seasons and jobs lost.

"Scary" is what Carole Higgins, Artistic & Managing Director of Carousel Theatre in Vancouver called the situation. Carousel, which produces theatre for young people, is still going ahead

with programming, but has had to put its 2010-2011 touring season on hiatus. 2010 was supposed to be the third year of a three-year funding grant they had received from the B.C Arts Council. They usually received the funding by late July – but by the fall it had still not been delivered. Then they received an email telling them their grant had been denied.

Under pressure from arts groups, the B.C. government finally announced it would uphold the multi-year grants, but if you were not on a multi-year grant you were out of luck. As of December, Carousel had still not seen the money. "And I don't know what will happen next year," says Higgins. "We run our budgets so tight to the wire. There is never any fat. Where do we cut?"

The Direct Access program, which was created to help not-for-profit charities and increase public access to the arts, was also suddenly cut late in the year. Amir Ali Alibhai, executive director of the Alliance for Arts and Culture, says their resource centre is now in jeopardy and they are going to have to run a deficit. He has also heard of galleries shutting their doors and theatre companies cutting matinee school programs.

Alibhai says the government has not only devastated the arts community with these cuts, it has broken a moral and social contract. Direct Access was funded by revenue from the B.C. Gaming Commission, which the not-for-profit and arts communities were instrumental in helping to implement. But the government has steadily been devoting less and less of the gaming revenue for the arts.

On top of all this, *The Globe and Mail* revealed a "muzzle" clause (my words) in the contracts of artists appearing in the Cultural Olympiad. I have no idea if any of the *Hive 3* companies would have even mentioned, let alone impugned, the Olympic

to lack of funding

BOTH ARTISTS AND THE PUBLIC

Games or an Olympic sponsor – but this stipulation borders on censorship and represents an unacceptable artistic stranglehold.

Suddenly, our decision to publish an upbeat Spotlight piece in *EQ* felt wrong. This was not a time for pretty pictures, no matter how innovative or inspiring. This time, Spotlight needed to shine a light (pardon the pun) on a different kind of story – the dire situation our B.C. members were dealing with in the face of drastic funding cuts.

The numbers get worse and worse

Although B.C. has the highest per capita number of artists in the country, it has always lagged behind in per capita expenditure on arts and culture – so what is happening now just makes a bad situation even worse. The September 2009 B.C. Gaming Commission arts and culture funding cuts account for an 11% drop at best, and a 26% drop at worst, between 2008/2009 and 2009/2010 funding. But it gets worse. Projections are for an 85% cut in next year's provincial budget and a 92% cut for the year after that.

These numbers come from the Alliance for Arts and Culture's detailed report entitled "Creativity Counts – The Case for Restoring Arts Funding in British Columbia," which does an excellent job of parsing out the cuts, both current and anticipated. The Alliance has also attempted to clarify the confusion surrounding government information released about funding, such as inconsistent numbers, changing funding sources and budget reductions. You can read the report at www.creativitycounts.ca.

Two facts seem undeniable in all of this. If the announced cuts are approved in early 2010 – the professional arts community in the not-for-profit sector will be devastated. And, given that B.C. arts funding represents only 1/20th of 1% of the province's total

\$40 billion budget, any potential savings will barely put a dent in the existing deficit.

So why make these cuts? No one has a good answer. Calls to B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell to rescind the cuts have so far proven unsuccessful. In the face of platitudes about "fiscal responsibility," could it really be that the government is looking anywhere and everywhere to stem the ballooning Olympic deficit?

The planned cuts come in the face of a report issued in November 2009 by the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services that included a recommendation to "Make funding of the arts a high priority in the 2010/2011 budget by returning to overall funding levels of 2008/2009."

A surprising benefit

If anything good can be seen from the crisis unfolding in B.C. it's how people have come together to let the government know these funding cuts are not acceptable.

The Alliance for Arts and Culture has created a toolkit for the arts community to use to deliver a strong common message to the government. (Please see www.allianceforarts.com and click on Advocacy.)

"The arts community has become united in a way never seen before," says Alibhai. "And we've learned that B.C. residents value arts and culture."

Even though we were unable to feature *Hive 3* on these pages, you can check out this amazing performance by 12 local Vancouver theatre companies at the 2010 Cultural Olympiad, which starts on January 22 before the 2010 Winter Olympics get under way, and continues through to the last competition in the Paralympic Games on March 21. Ticket information is available at www.buzzbuzzbuzz.ca. **EQ**