

A Thanksgiving Message to  
Kevin Krueger, Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts

*The following written submission was delivered in person to Kevin Krueger, Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts for The Province of British Columbia at a roundtable session held October 15. A group of 25 community leaders from Vancouver's Arts and Culture sector were in attendance. An edited version was read aloud, along with other submissions from and by each of the community leaders.*

October 14, 2009

Dear Minister,

I am a builder by nature and ancestry.

My cousin, the late Mavor Moore, was also a builder. He came from a long line of playwrights, directors, actors, Fabians, theatre critics, historians, arts patrons, doctors, businessmen, engineers and occasional world travelers. With other members of his generation who came of age in the 40s and 50s, together they pioneered the whole-scale development of a new Canadian cultural identity, founding countless institutions, creating indelible works of art, new artistic forms and innovative practices, along with establishing the infrastructure and public policies that would enable the distribution of Canada's artistic output to a citizenry in need of an authentic and distinct expression of their evolving identity—their sense of place, here at home, and in the world at large.

To this day, I remember the story he told of working in New York State on radio documentaries for the United Nations. The producer of CBS television's flagship drama series, *Studio One*, had offered him a job to become one of the show's in-house directors. The fee was to be \$500 a week. Through a series of Mephistophelean offers and counteroffers, his agent and CBS settled on the kingly sum \$1,500 a week. Now, remember this is 1950. As Mavor told it, each successive upping of the ante only served to "confirm his suspicion." Not soon after, he packed his bags and returned to Toronto, where he joined a colleague at CBC television, which was in the very early stages of preparations for its inaugural broadcast; he took up the position of chief producer for a weekly salary of \$165 plus benefits.

Thirty years ago, I came to Vancouver to begin a new life—decidedly at good distance from my Ontario birthplace. I worked up north in the early days of the development of Whistler's Blackcomb Village, as a member of the Laborers' Union 902. Eventually the restlessness of youth got the best of me, and I traveled afar. Before long, I had returned to Vancouver to attend Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts as a "mature student," studying in "temporary" facilities that to this day exist up on Burnaby Mountain. I made my way through a post-secondary education, in part, with weekend shifts driving cab and stints as a technician at the campus theatre. I graduated in 1986 with a Bachelor of Arts degree and a considerable student debt.

For the next 10 years, I toured to and worked in various city centres across Canada. I also performed, directed and held teaching positions and creative residencies in various US cities: Albany, Boise Idaho, Boston, Sacramento, and at Atlanta, Georgia's prestigious Emory University. At the end of each and every sojourn, I returned here to BC. It was by no means a *fait accompli*. I could have chosen to settle down elsewhere in a larger urban centre—in say, Toronto, Montreal, New York, Berlin, or perhaps Paris. I had certainly considered it. Even Mavor Moore, of all people, living at the time in Vancouver, had confided to my mother that I might want to try making a go of it in Los Angeles' film and television industry. Though I chose not to head south, if you watch closely you'll catch me on reruns of *The X-Files*. Yep...filmed right here in BC.

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Like many of my generation, who had studied and come of age professionally here on the West Coast, Vancouver was our home—a source of inspiration and sustenance. I chose to live here not because the city possessed an illustrious past (which it did), not because of the impressive nature of its cultural institutions (many of them were), not because of the city's performance venues (there were, and continue to be, far too few for a municipality of its size); nor did I choose to live here because there was a particularly large audience for alternative theatre (there wasn't), and I certainly did not stay because there was a surfeit of public funding in the region (there wasn't). And finally no, I was not drawn to Vancouver because of the mountains; the city's picturesque parks remain my preferred place of refuge.

I chose to live in BC because, at the time, I firmly believed there was a future for me here; I believed that the fertile creative ground that had been laid by the many talented and dedicated individuals before me held within it great possibilities.

BC was indeed a place of “possibility,” a place where you were taken at face value, where one could gain respect and recognition for the work you did. Here you were expected to prove your worth; you had to gain the trust and faith of colleagues, of audiences, of the critics in the media, of public funding agencies, and of private sectors supporters. It was then that I put my trust in the belief that my efforts and those of the burgeoning arts community would, over time, be justly compensated.

It was particularly struck by the character of the people—both senior and junior—who defined the city's arts community. Ingenuity and innovation was the standard. Collaboration, industry-leading best practices and the sharing of resources were actively promoted. Generosity, compassion and curiosity were expected—indeed, these attributes were the norm.

Now when I travel the world, in my job as executive director of the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, to London, Paris, Seoul, Shanghai, Adelaide, Wellington, Brussels, Bergen, Berlin, Paris, Seattle, Portland Toronto, Calgary, Montreal, St Johns, Edinburgh, Prague, Sydney and Glasgow, I am welcomed as an ambassador for an artistic community whose reputation needs no calling card. The energy and vision of BC artists, the caliber and relevance of their work, the skill and savvy of our arts administrators, production and technical personnel, marketers and graphic designers—their artistry and expertise is acclaimed world-wide and is considered to be on the leading edge of contemporary art practices.

The annual PuSh Festival plays an important role in meeting this export demand for BC's artists and their cultural products. The Festival and its PuSh Assembly trade market links Canadian artists and producers with foreign buyers. It prepares Canadian artists for export readiness and International market development. The Assembly identifies business opportunities for Canadian companies by encouraging new avenues for touring, co-production, creative residencies and cultural reciprocity. Visiting regional, national and International delegates attend performances, participate in roundtables, lead workshops, learn of creative projects in development and negotiate tours, commissions and co-productions.

We have sought a model for the five-day PuSh Assembly that reflects how genuine, long-term relationships are fostered, and ultimately how business is conducted. During the course of the past several years, the Assembly has inspired similarly mandated festivals and trade events to replicate and build upon the unique models we have employed. New York, Brighton and in Es Terni, in Italy are just a few examples of the trend-setting influence we now possess.

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This commitment to new ideas, new practices, new forms and new approaches has helped put BC artists at the forefront of artistic innovation in both Canada and internationally. Numerous opportunities have opened up for our cultural producers through their exposure and networking at the Festival and the Assembly. Discussions and negotiations have been fostered between Canadian and International presenters, leading to significant new business and market development opportunities for countless BC-based artists and their counterparts elsewhere in Canada.

In today's world, the means of cultural production and dissemination are undergoing a fundamental transformation. If BC's performing artists are to remain competitive in the years ahead, we must ensure that our province's cultural sector remains an engine of growth. We must find ways to unleash the creative energies of our increasingly diverse population. We must work together to build thriving cultural industries. By reinventing our province as a cultural centre in the world, we need only appeal to the highest of civic and social values; we would then effectively distinguish our cultural identity in the global economy in ways that would ensure BC's continued prosperity.

Thank you Minister for today's roundtable. At this time in our collective history, conversation is more critical than ever. We are at the threshold of stepping up on to the world stage. Sadly, we are also teetering towards the precipice of collapse. Our province's artistic communities are facing unprecedented challenges because of recent changes to the disbursement of Gaming revenues and the proposed funding cuts to the British Columbia Arts Council. We face threats to the survival of countless organizations, to artists' livelihood and to thousands of jobs.

For the rest of the country (indeed the rest of the world), investment in arts and culture has been maintained or increased; surely, this is a testament to the fact that the arts are indeed a powerful engine in any healthy economy. In straight business terms, stimulus investments are an enlightened response to the current recession; they are key to an effective recovery strategy. For elected governments everywhere else, not investing in the arts is viewed as throwing up one's hands in the face of this recession. Here in BC, the very opposite is considered true.

Minister, like you I am a servant of the public good. I head up a registered, non-profit organization and report to an elected board of directors. I am held accountable by a voting membership that looks to me to stay true to the letter and spirit of the PuSh Festival's mandate—in both speech and deed. Like you, I am also a professional. My salary, though modest in comparison, I assume is like yours the source of my livelihood. Like you, I believe arts and culture are the basis of a civil society. And like you, I have dedicated myself to ensuring that the citizen's of British Columbia benefit from residing in a province for which affordable access to art is considered a fundamental right and an essential service, along with highways, public transit, a decent education, a roof over one's head, food on the table and medical care.

Like you, I believe the citizens of BC want a portion of their tax dollars spent on the arts—an amount equal to the arts' proven social, economic and cultural value. They want public funds invested into individual artists, institutions, organizations, infrastructure, human resources, tax incentives, and sector-wide capacity-building initiatives that ensure that arts and culture will not only survive but flourish in our province.

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When I travel in late November to Budapest, funded by the Canada Council for the Arts, with a group of Canadian delegates to promote the vision, vitality and innovative spirit of BC and other Canadian artists, what should I say about the present state of British Columbia's performing arts communities? When I attend Krakow's Divine Comedy Festival, in early December—I have been invited to sit on an International jury to assess the "best" of Polish theatre with my travel costs covered by funds from the Hungarian government—what would you suggest I speak of?

Back here in BC, what do I say to artists wishing to be presented in the PuSh Festival, or to a local agent, or a producer wishing to respond with a "yes" to invitations to tour from out-of-town other presenters and festivals. What do I tell them, when it becomes clear that they may no longer be able to sustain their organizations here at home, let alone consider embarking on International tours of their productions. To visiting out-of-town presenters and buyers, what do I say to their offers of support for initiatives involving cultural exchange between BC artists and their respective countries, when I am no longer certain that our organization will be able to reciprocate with offers to present their artists back here in the PuSh Festival.

To a younger generation still immersed in a secondary or post-secondary arts education, who are at this very point asking themselves what the future holds for them, and should they dare to choose a career in the arts—to them Minister, what do I say? To the province's young professionals—emerging artists, administrators and technicians, who are now considering, as I had 20 years previous, the difficult, life-determining decision of whether they should lay down roots here, stick it out, or simply pack up and leave—what can I hope to say?

To my organization's 19-member board of directors who will donate thousands of dollars and contribute thousands of volunteer hours over the next 12 months, what do I say? To my 4 permanent staff and 15 seasonal contractors, to our organization's 100+ volunteers, to 30 some vendors who supply everything from trucks, lighting and sound equipment, venues, gaffer tape, paint, gasoline, airline tickets, hotel accommodation, food, beverages, ticketing services, and the like—what do I say to them?

For our organization's 3,000 member e-list and the 10,000 distinct visitors to the PuSh Festival website amounting to over 1.3 million hits during the month of January alone, what spin should there be put on our weekly posts? For the 36,000 readers of our Festival's program guide and the 350,000 readers of our print ads each and every week for the next four months, how should the copy read?

To local and national journalists, and to the hundreds (likely to be in the thousands) of foreign media that will soon descend upon our region for the performances, exhibitions, literary readings and other cultural festivities of the 2010 Cultural Olympiad and related sports events—what sound bites do you suggest I prepare for them? And finally, to the 20,000+ audience members who will attend this year's PuSh Festival during January and February—Minister, what should be the tone of our volunteers' nightly pre-show speeches?

I have poured several buckets of blood and sweat into my life as a professional artist. I have committed myself to the future of this city and this province. I have tethered my imagination to the task of fostering an artistic community whose work, strengths, assets, values and sensibilities could stand side beside any other contemporary arts milieu—anywhere in the country, and anywhere in the world. Believe me, I am not alone; there are thousands of us who have done the very same.

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For the past twenty years, I have dedicated my energies to working with colleagues, with volunteers from the community at large, with government bureaucrats, private sector supporters and other stakeholders on building a social-profit arts sector that is founded not so much on bricks and mortar, but rather on human capital. And now the very existence of this human capital is at stake: a capital that has been caringly and passionately—with great diligence I might add—fostered *in* and *by* communities right across this province, a human capital that is honoured and acclaimed the world over.

On the evening of January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010, I will return to my alma mater to address a 400-strong audience seated in the new Fei and Milton Wong Experimental Theatre at SFU Woodward's. The complex and its stunning facilities will be a permanent home for the University's School for the Contemporary Arts. The occasion will herald the rebirth of one of Vancouver's most treasured landmarks. This sneak preview will open a curtain on the next stage in an ongoing revitalization of the city's Downtown Eastside neighborhood. The event will also launch the 6<sup>th</sup> installment of the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival. The opening performance is a local adaptation of Paris-based, Jerome Bel's acknowledged masterpiece *The Show Must Go On*. The piece involves 23 community members standing in for the past, present and future of the Woodward's building, SFU, and our still vibrant performing arts community. For that gathering...please Minister, I fear that I may be at a loss for what to say.

This past Thanksgiving weekend, each and every one of the individuals sitting here today were hard at work considering what questions to ask of you and your aides, considering what needed to be said, in order to help bring about a reversal of your government's recent decisions.

Minister, I am at risk of losing my faith—the faith I have held so dear. I am at risk of no longer imagining the future I had envisioned a lifetime ago, a horizon that I was determined never to lose sight of. To me Minister, what say you?

Sincerely,

Norman Armour  
Executive Director  
PuSh International Performing Arts Festival