

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2000

THE LONDON FREE PRESS

Sports arena, entertainment complex favoured projects

Ignoring culture a costly risk

I've always been puzzled, never more so than at this moment, by the peculiar blind spot that afflicts many people in this community when it comes to "culture."

I put the word between quotation marks because that's the way it is usually used around city hall. "Culture" is regarded there as something that interests only a few elite members of the community. If you want to risk a frosty reception at city hall, at least up until now, just define yourself as a cultural organization.

This blind spot explains why London seems prepared to spend in the neighbourhood of \$40 million of borrowed money to build a downtown hockey arena and entertainment complex at a time when the only two professional arts organizations in the city Orchestra London and the Grand Theatre, are in serious financial crisis. This bias seems to be rooted in a belief that a sports complex is something for the masses while the orchestra and theatre are for a privileged elite.

All you have to do is look at audience statistics to blow that outmoded idea to smithereens. Why someone hasn't done this before I can't imagine because the results of a few quick phone calls surprised even me. Here they are:

Orchestra London sells about 75,000 tickets a year to its various concerts. The Grand Theatre sells about the same number for a total annual audience of about 150,000 for the city's two professional performing arts organizations. In its regular season, the London Knights hockey team sells about 120,000 tickets at prices that are about half the prices of theatre and symphony tickets. In a playoff year, the Knights total audience could be slightly higher than the total audience for the Grand Theatre and Orchestra London.

These audience figures would indicate that Londoners strike a healthy balance between "culture" and sports entertainment. Admittedly the sports figure doesn't include minor-league professional baseball but neither does the culture total include performances of vocal and chamber music at Aeolian Hall, many concerts and recitals under the auspices of Western's Faculty of Music and hundreds of other concerts at various venues.

And it's diversified. Last Wednesday night, when I looked at the capacity audience in Centennial Hall for the orchestra's annual opera gala, I saw a cross-section of this community. The only common denominator was a love of music — in this case the powerfully romantic music of Italian opera — something that is available to everyone

these days in one form or another regardless of age, income, education or any of the other classifications we employ to divide people.

In light of this, how do you explain the disproportionate support at city hall for the hockey arena and the London Knights in comparison with our professional cultural organizations?

According to present plans, the administration at city hall intends to contribute heavily to the capital cost of the arena but wants the private developers to run it without continuing municipal support. This may or may not be realistic but even the city's decision to borrow money to finance its share of the building cost represents a continuing subsidy. As all of us know, you have to pay for borrowed money. When you're thinking of millions of dollars, as in the case of the arena, the annual interest alone will amount to many hundreds of thousands of dollars.

How do you explain the disproportionate support at city hall for the hockey arena and the London Knights In comparison with our professional cultural organizations?

Contrast this with the current level of municipal support for Orchestra London — \$125,000 a year — all of which goes directly back to the city in the form of rent for Centennial Hall. And I practically fell off my chair a few weeks ago when I learned for the first time the extent of the city's largesse to the Grand Theatre — \$25,000 a year!

This blind spot even seems to prevent the city from accurately assessing the economic contribution that Orchestra London and the Grand Theatre make to London, particularly the downtown area. If the core often seems deserted in the evening, what would it look like without the 150,000 visits annually generated by the two professional performing arts organizations?

Even more critical, how would the collapse of these primary cultural organizations look to the very investors, researchers and educated high-tech workers that the city is now desperately trying to recruit?

Hardly the image of a progressive and expanding community that cares for its important cultural institutions as symbols of civic maturity and pride.

Peter Desbarats (desbarat@julian.uwo.ca) is a London author and journalist and a member of the board of Orchestra London.