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By Denise Hay -- **Special to the Free Press**

What London needs is a good Garthing

The local arts community lacks someone outrageous and outspoken as its advocate

I was surprised to see in last weekend's paper the number of letters to the editor regarding Orchestra London's financial quagmire. Surprised, pleasantly surprised, that so many people could work up enough interest in the subject to contribute an opinion.

Given the current situations of both the Grand Theatre and Orchestra London, one can't be faulted for thinking there isn't much enthusiasm or interest in either out there.

Patience, for example, an excellent play by a young Canadian playwright, just closed at the Grand, coming up short of its projected sales. Anne of Green Gables, however, will probably do very well, just as those crowd-pleasing pop concerts tend to drag Orchestra London back closer to the black.

This is the kind of thing that tends to make me gnash my teeth and wonder at the lack of urbanity in this town. The kind of thing that makes me think this is a town, and not a city. However, there's nothing productive about this kind of thinking. I can't purport to be the voice of high culture, if you will, because (a) I'm not, and (b) who would listen to me?

Perhaps, then, what London needs is somebody charismatic up there at some helm or other, giving the arts the kind of high profile that individual little voices in the crowd can't do. Toronto, in addition to a wildly flamboyant mayor who you may or may not consider a municipal embarrassment -- but who else would have the imagination and chutzpah to tear down the Gardiner Expressway, I ask you -- has always had colourful characters surrounding its arts community. London is blessed with pockets of eccentric talent, none of which is capable of raising the profile to the extent that it is constantly visible.

Imagine Orchestra London having a conductor named Jukka-Pekka Saraste. I have no idea whether Saraste has a personality to match that name, but the name alone is enough to make you sit up and blink.

Look at what Garth Drabinsky and Ed Mirvish have accomplished. I don't think you could find anyone who considers himself a fan of Drabinsky, nor even anyone who likes him, for that matter, but his effect was incontrovertible. His personality is legendary, and that makes for good arts coverage, and that has a spinoff effect on all of the arts.

Standing in the hallway of a rather seedy little establishment in Toronto last year, looking for a pen, I found myself involved in a little coterie discussing Drabinsky. Or, as they say in Toronto, the Garth.

"What," I say, never one to shy away from leaping unbidden into the conversational fray, "is with that hair? Did anybody ever say to the guy, 'Garth, the hair has got to go Let's make the jump up over the ears?' "

"I want to know what it is with the green sweater."

"Ho ho," I say. "The green sweater."

"Every time I talked to the guy," says my new friend, "I kept thinking, 'Why don't you get rid of that butt-ugly sweater?' "

"Ho ho," I say again, a conversational parry that has oft made me the envy of the social sets. "Methinks you have talked to the Garth. Methinks you may have more intimate knowledge of the Garth than my brief moments through newsprint."

"Oh, yes," the new chap says, in a voice heavy with meaning, "I'm his conductor."

Garth's conductor. Sounds like something out of *I Am Garth's Body*: "While the heart pumps, the neurons and neurotransmitters are busy sending out their own messages and reactors: fig. 1 is a detail of Garth's conductor."

But no, this fellow has conducted Phantom all around the world -- Phantom, of course, being a Garth thing, in more ways than one.

"Really," I said. "How about that?" I believed every word. It's Toronto, after all. This is a perfectly natural thing to do in Toronto. One always bumps into people in Toronto that know somebody who is somebody or knows somebody who's been In The News.

Garth is such a well-known personality that I recognized that green sweater, and had often wondered why he didn't see a stylist with all his money.

Surely London is big enough to attract flamboyance. Urban enough to tolerate the eccentric. Desperate enough to need both. I'd like to see someone heading up the Grand or Orchestra London, or even other artistic arenas that we haven't even conceived of yet, who is so out there you just can't ignore him or her. Someone who can make us feel we would be fools not to participate in these events, someone who would be so much a visible presence in London that attending plays and concerts and readings and whatever all else would become a standard part of our lives.

I don't know if we'd be up to accommodating such a person. But I still think that the arts is more than just meeting budget, and I'd like to see somebody in London that can get people excited enough to write in about that, and not just letters about fiscal restraint.

Denise Hay is a London freelance writer. Her column appears every other Saturday.