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Sticking with orchestra makes sense, says Reaney

James Reaney / London Free Press

Whenever a London cultural organization runs into money problems, it reminds me of the lonely days I spent toiling at the London Regional Art & Historical Museums when it was closed to the public.

As part-time secretary to Brenda Wallace, then in charge of LRAHM's big, blue roofs, I was an errant page in a melancholy production of Hamlet playing to an empty theatre.

Such memories come flickering back because of Orchestra London's problems as it stares at a debt of \$660,000. A \$110,000 loan from the city has come, rightly, with strings attached. But occasionally you hear the suggestion it would a fine idea to switch off the orchestra and start anew.

Based on my brief experience at the old London Regional Gallery, as LRAHM was known before the museums merged into the operation, I'm not so sure. Anew is not so easy to do.

The art gallery had started off with a bang in 1980. New director Wallace left her job as project co-ordinator with the Canada Council in Ottawa to accept the London position in 1981.

Without warning, the money seemed to dry up. The board and Wallace decided to shut down the Raymond Moriyama-designed masterpiece by the forks of the Thames and start anew.

Little things would go wrong during the weeks the gallery was closed. With lights and heating kept low to save bucks, it was as warm and festive as Grand Bend on a cold winter night.

Preparations were made for a Martin Scorsese film festival. Working in patches of light amid the darkened corridors, we got the titles and the actors right on the posters. We got Scorsese's named wrong.

The pool, in one of the lower galleries, was intended by Moriyama as a visual echo of the nearby Thames River. It echoed all right -- with an unstoppable leak. The drip, drip, drip just added to the clammy sense of a castle moat gone bad. Later, the pool was drained.

One of the gallery's best attractions was -- and is -- its restaurant site. There is no finer spot to pick up a fork near the forks of the Thames. Chef owner-operators from around the London region cooked up proposals for the space, only to boil over when the discussions were made public.

Wallace sometimes joked about needing "a wife," someone to guide her around London and accompany her to functions. As her less-than-stellar secretary, I never agreed with that sentiment more than when she RSVPed with regrets, pleading illness, just before one such function was due to start.

It is poignant to recall Wallace's staff almost begging her not to miss this one function, offering to drive her over or accompany her. Wallace just became more adamant. She would not go to that gala, which only involved Prince Philip dropping by to visit his old chum, the late Col. Tom Lawson.

I blame that lapse on those days Wallace spent leading a tiny crew in the dark under the big, blue roofs. Work in an empty bunker for a while and the world outside never feels as friendly.

Despite all that, there was a gutsy mood inside the building, a determination to get things right. Wallace knew her contemporary art and had big-league visions. In long-time curator Paddy O'Brien, she had an able No. 2. One of Wallace's hires was Matthew Teitelbaum, a bright light at all times during those gloomy days in the bunker. Teitelbaum now heads the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Once the board and other volunteers recovered from the shock of the shutdown, they came up with ways of battling back. The gallery did come out of the dark and reopened. Wallace wisely decided to find a real secretary -- a relief to both of us.

For this reason, the ensuing drama happened without me. Sure, the gallery had reopened, but soon the money and related problems were back.

Wallace never made the adjustment to London -- and London never adjusted to her. She was at home with British avant-garde artists Gilbert and George. Unfortunately, she was trying to make a home for their edgy stuff in a Gilbert and Sullivan universe -- or at least one where you don't kiss off a date with Prince Philip.

After more financial troubles, a later edition of the board fired Wallace 15 years ago to the day last Friday. The gallery began anew -- again. That was its third fresh start in five or six years.

Don't get me wrong. I love wandering around LRAHM, especially with the lights on and the art and exhibits there to treasure.

But if you want me to say all the subsequent good stuff happened because the place once shut down, well, I can't.

The gallery took a long time to recover from its days as a big, empty space.

It would be the same if we silenced the orchestra just to see how that sounded.