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Culture's weekend in the sun



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In the ultimate playoff between sports and culture, how do the athletes always seize the populist beer-drinkers' turf, while artists are consigned to some isolated patch set aside for the creative class?

When will Canada grant equal status to those whose hearts are more likely to be set aflutter by the sound of great music in a concert hall than by the sight of goons on skates smashing one another into the boards?

I have a dream, a personal feel-good movie, in which the crowds roar their approval as the artist team rallies and the scoreboard flashes Hockey Night in Canada 4, Cultural Weekend 6.

In late September, for one weekend, Canadians across the country will get a chance to take part in the first of an annual event called Culture Days. It's an imaginative and ambitious undertaking designed to inspire millions of ordinary citizens to savour the arts by becoming directly engaged in the creative process.

But this is not about buying tickets to a play or looking at the paintings hanging on the wall of a museum. It's an event that dares to use catch phrases like "interactive," "grassroots" and "hands-on."

Those words might set off your mental alarm. Is this just promotional spin? But happily, Culture Days represents something more interesting — a sweeping attempt to close the gap between artists and the public.

The idea is to inspire broad participation not just in downtown Toronto but in communities large and small. All the events are free, and instead of being passive spectators, participants get a chance to become involved with the artistic process and break down the barrier between the creators and the public.

In Winnipeg, a team of performers and artists will travel around the city persuading people to share their stories and collaborate in the process of mythologizing the city's history.

In St. John's, seasoned professionals will help aspiring playwrights write, recite and record short plays about certain locations. Anyone interested in tuning in can take a self-guided walking tour and, with the help of a cellphone, listen to a play while standing in the area it concerns.

For the kickoff in the fall of 2010, most of the country will experience Culture Days on the weekend of Sept. 24-26. Alberta, which has had something called Alberta Art Days for several years, will have its Culture Days the previous weekend. Dates have yet to be announced for Nunavut, Yukon and the Northwest Territories.

How did Culture Days come into being? Certain arts leaders, including Peter Herrndorf of the National Arts Centre and Piers Handling of the Toronto International Film Festival, have been hatching the idea for several years. But it's really a national version of something Quebec has been doing annually since 1997. Journées de la Culture draws 300,000 participants in more than 300 towns and cities.

One important feature attractive to government cultural ministries is that the entire enterprise requires a budget of only \$1 million or so. It is almost entirely driven by volunteers among both artists and organizers.

Finally, there's at least one event that offers good news for those who can't face a weekend without their sports fix. In Regina, the Dunlop Art Gallery will have an exhibit highlighting 100 years of Saskatchewan Roughriders history. And during Culture Days, those on hand to engage with the public will include not only artists but some former Roughrider players.

Who could ask for anything more?

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