

Arts groups converge for Culture Days

September festival announced across the country

BY MELISSA LEONG

Antoni Cimolino delivered two messages yesterday to Canadians at the launch of Culture Days, a celebration of arts and culture. To artists and organizations across the country: Please present free activities to the public between Sept. 24 and 26. And to the public: Please accept their invitation.

Cimolino, the chair of Culture Days national steering committee, billed the annual event as the largest-ever public participation campaign undertaken by the arts and cultural community.

"I call it a movement, ParticipAction for the arts," said Janice Pierce, CEO of Luminato and chair of Culture Days' Ontario task force. "Look at Nuit Blanche as an example. Clearly, there's an appetite in the communities for this kind of engagement."

"How can you have comments about [how] the majority of Canadians don't participate in these elitist arts and culture things? Every arts council in every city in North America tells the same story that audiences for arts and culture annually are larger than all of the professional sports teams put together."

Organizations such as the National Ballet of Canada, the Canadian Opera Company and the Toronto International Film Festival Group are developing Culture Day projects; but amateur groups and individuals are encouraged to participate as well, Pierce said.

"We consider it an entire ecosystem of creativity. We value the fact that they're taking their five-year-old to ballet class and taking violin classes at 40. That makes them part of us, those who spend their lives in the cultural sector."

Plans for Culture Days were announced yesterday in Ontario, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Prince Edward Island. Toronto's event featured sculptors, steel drummers, latin jazz singer Amanda Martinez and 12-year-old Ottawa singer Ayda Khan, whose talents were featured on Oprah Winfrey's website.

Cimolino, the general director of Stratford Shakespeare Festival, said the idea for this movement germinated in 2006. They were inspired by the 13-year success of Quebec's annual Journées de la Culture festival, which draws hundreds of thousands of people to events hosted by more than 8,000 artists and professionals.

"Ongoing advocacy for support for the arts is something we'll always have to do but in addition to that, we needed to engage Canadians," he said.

Organizers are receiving funding to cover the campaign and the website. "It's driven by the users and the grassroots, therefore it's a low cost model," he said. "There was this moment when we realized that we didn't have to muscle it in any way. We simply had to tell people about it."

■ Culture Days will take place from Sept. 24 to 26 in every province except Alberta. (Alberta's Culture Days will be from Sept. 17 to 19, under the existing event, Alberta Arts Days.) Dates for Nunavut, Northwest Territories and Yukon will be announced shortly. Participants can register at culturedays.ca.

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mleong@nationalpost.com

Correction

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Janice Price is CEO of Luminato and chair of the Culture Days' Ontario task force. Her name was misspelled yesterday in Arts&Life.

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