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**CANADIAN CLUB
Luncheon Series**

**“What’s really happening in Toronto.
Is there really a cultural renaissance?”**

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**Speaking Notes
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Great architects building extraordinary buildings (I'm glad Jack Diamond's here)—these are exciting times—but perhaps even more exciting is the sea change in public awareness of what a great city can and should be. The bread-not-circuses mentality, which fought against the opera house at the end of the eighties, seems at last to have passed. I don't think we're out of the woods, but the Prime Minister seems to be showing some concern for the quality of life in our cities and this can only be good news because, far more important than talking about funding, is first to talk about creating a climate in which the arts can flourish.

There is no lack of artistic genius in Canada—I use the word advisedly—think, for example, of the writers, filmmakers, directors, designers, choreographers, painters, sculptors, actors. It's a wondrous cornucopia and I would suggest that we have everything within this country for a cultural renaissance in which we could lead the world *if* we first create a climate in which it can thrive.

We're not alone in failing to create a climate where the arts are seen to be at the centre of a healthy society. Trevor Nunn several years ago took over the National Theatre in Great Britain. On the day his appointment was announced, and his photo was all over the press, he hailed a taxi. London taxi driver: "You're that Trevor Nunn, aren't you? *He said that he was.*"

You directed *Sunset Boulevard* and all that Lloyd Webber stuff. *He had*. Now you're going to the NT. *Yes*. Tell me, Trevor. What went wrong?"

You see, Tony Blair had his finger on the national pulse when he talked to Nicholas Hytner, the current director of the National Theatre in London, about funding the arts in Great Britain, and Hytner indiscreetly reported the conversation to the press. Blair said, "there's no problem whatsoever in giving the arts all the money they need and more, but how would I fix the tabloids?"

I don't understand two things: First, why government in Canada seems not to get it, as Blair finally did, that it could silence the arts lobby for a very small price. It's not health OR the arts, education OR the arts, but health AND the arts, education AND the arts, because the amount of money needed to make them viable is so small. And second, I'm not at all sure that politicians are right in regarding the arts as a potential liability to their popularity. A political lobbyist advising the recent Martin campaign told me that only one in four under the age of forty bothers to vote.

At the COC, 40% of our single tickets last season were sold to young people under 30. Might not, I suggested, the disillusion in the minds of the young be somewhat countered by more than a casual glance from government in the direction of the arts? Surely the reason for the disillusion of young people with politics is that so much is to do with expediency and so little to do with a vision for a vibrant and vital society. Artistic leaders, as well as politicians,

should cease to focus on what it is perceived the market wants and should be ready to lead and not to follow. That will inevitably involve the courage to take risks, the willingness even to fail in doing so.

I don't mean that a good leader plays with irresponsible risk, but I do think that one of the reasons that too many artistic organizations are languishing in this country is because too many of their leaders and boards do not realize that the most dangerous thing they can do is NOT to risk. If, back in the early 90s at the Canadian Opera Company, we had walked around Toronto saying "How about a bit of Schoenberg and Bartók?" I don't think there would have been many takers. But the impact of Robert Lepage's now famous double-bill, *Bluebeard's Castle/Erwartung*—played first in Toronto and the next year at the Edinburgh International Festival and after that opening the Melbourne Festival, the Hong Kong Festival, going to New York, Geneva, Cincinnati, Vancouver, Montreal... — that impact has radically changed the Canadian Opera Company.

More recently, many people thought we were mad when we embarked on François Girard's production of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* with, as its companion piece, *The Symphony of Psalms* and opened our season with it. Obviously not the Bank of Montreal, who had the courage to sponsor it. And the result of BMO's courage and astute risk-taking—remember, most companies think their clients will only come to something extremely well known—was that the production was invited to the Edinburgh Festival, where it took Europe by

storm. Our future at the COC has not been defined by the tried and true, but by calculated artistic risk. Opening our new season with *The Handmaid's Tale* has proved another example.

You certainly won't build a cultural renaissance by being cravenly politically correct. I was asked by Sheila Copps when she was Heritage Minister to go to a conference in Ottawa on Diversity and Culture, and I was not surprised to hear that the Department of Heritage then planned to put most of its money into grassroots multicultural projects. There was a feeling that so-called Eurocentric art forms such as symphony, opera and ballet, were no longer representative of Canada's cultural diversity. Indeed the conference brochure stated that "great talent is being wasted in culturally diverse communities because of lack of access and opportunities."

This surprises me because, scanning the list of graduates from our training program for young singers, our Ensemble Studio, I see young Canadians not only from virtually every European country, but also from Russia, Moldava, the Ukraine, Lebanon, Israel, Korea, Hong Kong, South America, including the new international star and recent Ensemble graduate Isabel Bayrakdarian (Lebanese born Armenian Canadian).

I heard so much at the conference about allowing Canadians to tell their stories. Well, come and see the kids in our summer camps or in our children's programs after school and on weekends and you will find that every possible

race and social demographic is represented there and in making up stories and making their operas and in reinterpreting existing operas, these children are very much at home. (Chinese cultural centre—March Break—I liked the new riddles they made up for Turandot). We're on the road every year, reaching over 20,000 schoolchildren, touring two operas designed for performance to children, a tour made possible by Zellers.

Education is at the heart of any cultural renaissance. I'm delighted to see so many students here today. Every year I spend an exciting week with the Royal Conservatory Orchestra. I worry what will happen to those wonderfully talented young musicians if one orchestra after another is allowed to languish for lack of support.

[Not that I think we should remain Eurocentric in our vision. Benjamin Britten went to Japan and for the first time in his life saw Noh plays and a result of that experience was the composition of three extraordinary chamber operas. These are masterpieces inspired by Britten's encounter with another culture. The inverse, I suggest, must be the experience of someone coming from a culture in which, let's say, the symphonic repertoire is not played (or any other of our so-called Eurocentric art forms) and discovering how exciting and enriching that experience can be.]

There is no place for false egalitarianism in funding the arts—the principle that a thousand hopeful flowers need to be given equal treatment. Simply being

fair to a wide constituency and dividing the pot evenly will lead to hopeless mediocrity. There must be cultural leaders in Canada, there must be organisations which represent Canada internationally and are funded appropriately, and as well, equally valuably, but funded at a different level, museums, theatre companies, ballet companies, orchestras who are primarily the life blood of their region. But it's not a matter of saying this is how big a piece of cloth we have—let's share it out as best we can, it's a matter of dreaming of what Canada could become—and, for very little extra money, acting accordingly. We have the Four Seasons Opera; let's not have a four opera season.

So.....where does responsibility for arts funding lie? ...With government, the private sector, just those who care? Do leading financial institutions have a responsibility for the health of our society? Or does that responsibility rest with the discretion of their shareholders—the Margaret Thatcher trickle-down theory. Whatever her considerable merits and achievements, Mrs. Thatcher's Trickle-down theory simply did not work. It destroyed the arts in the UK and accelerated a great brain drain to North American universities as research money failed to simply trickle down.

And there was no trickle-down in the US in the boom 1980's. Between 1980 and 1988, charitable giving by Americans with annual salaries above \$500,000 a year fell by 65%. I take my figures from IRS data on charitable

deductions analyzed in an article entitled “Look who’s being tight-fisted” which appeared in “Business Week”, November 5, 1990. And in the UK it’s much worse. A recent survey showed that the seriously rich in England give away less than half of that given by their American counterparts.

John Maynard Keynes went a good deal too far when he said, “Capitalism is the extraordinary belief that the nastiest of men for the nastiest of reasons will somehow work for the benefit of us all.” But if he had said in a more temperate manner what I hope he meant—that we are naïve and irresponsible to believe that the health of a nation can merely be left to the will of well-intentioned individuals—then I think he was on the mark. A successful entrepreneur said to me recently “if individuals don’t want to support the arts perhaps they’re not necessary after all.” Meaning the arts, not the individuals. A civilized society ignores at its peril the best that has been thought, felt and dreamed. And that’s what the arts are about.

Andrew Carnegie, that saint of American philanthropy believed that “the man who dies rich dies disgraced.” He disposed of 90% of his vast fortune by the end of his life and some believe, and I hope they’re right, that a new golden age of philanthropy is on its way. Certainly we’re seeing phenomenal generosity in Canada at this moment, but most of that generosity is directed towards buildings, and the issue of funding what goes on inside the buildings remains in crisis. Somehow, buildings are seen as a solid investment — but the reason for

why they're there, what goes on inside them, is not seen to have the same solid reality.

I am reminded of Wallace Stevens, the poet who was also at one time a Connecticut insurance man. "Reality" he said, "is an activity of the most august imagination." And the question of what is real, rather than simply "nice to have, once we've taken care of essentials like rebuilding transit, education and healthcare"—words of Greg Reed, CEO of Altamira in a recent Op Ed in the Star—has a lot to do with the way we view arts funding.

A cultural renaissance needs substantial private funding, allied to a new level of government investment, and I would like here to pay tribute to the valiant work of the Ontario Arts Council with both the past Conservative government and the present Liberal government, who have championed arts funding to such a degree that the unusual situation exists, at least at the Canadian Opera Company, that we now receive more money from the Province than from the Feds—very Quebec.

But I'm not talking about matching endowment schemes. Matching endowment is a worthy idea that in the last few years has impeded at every step a responsible approach to funding the arts and acknowledging what arts organisations really need. It's great to have half a million private dollars matched by government with another half a million dollars, except that the income generated – say \$50,000 a year –doesn't do very much. And when you

couldn't afford to put the half million aside in the first place, it does not help the bottom line. Remember that even the admirable and magnificently increased endowment at the U of T does not begin to cover its operating budget.

Berlin's artistic problems have been in the news again. Berlin has a severe economic crisis to solve and there was recently the unprecedented suggestion that there might have to be a cut to at least one of its three opera houses.

Understandably, hands were raised in horror at anything so barbaric and finally Frau Weiss, the Culture Minister, came up with some funding: She said "Berlin has three opera houses and now Berlin can afford three opera houses." (Berlin – same size as Toronto)

[There was an immediate injection of 25 million Euros (\$38.5 Cdn) and then an additional \$22 million Euros (\$33.8 Cdn) annually beginning this year. Already the three companies have a public subsidy of \$115 million Euros (\$177 Cdn) a year. Nevertheless, the Minister pointed out, the houses—even with this added funding—will have to make some painful reforms and they are going to have to pool their technical and backstage resources while continuing to operate independently.]

The annual subsidy in Berlin to opera alone will be 140 million Euros (\$215.6) plus the immediate 25 million Euro lifeline. The Canada Council's budget for all the arts in Canada is significantly less—it disbursed \$142 million in 2002-2003. It's difficult to imagine a federal budget in Germany not

mentioning the arts. It just happened here and we're rich. They've got the economic problems.

To adequately fund the arts in Canada—including stabilizing the major institutions—the Canada Council needs an extra couple of hundred million dollars a year, but it's generally felt that even \$100 million could deal with immediate problems. I was interested to see that last Thursday the federal government through Industry Canada handed out \$86 million for research; studies funded include one on British carnal relations in the 18th century; another on intimacy between Ottawa escorts and their clients; cottage life, a study entitled “My cottage is everything; expressions of meaning in the Ontario cottage experience”; and leisure walking. Perhaps best of all, I liked the munificent funding of a study called “understanding feelings of guilt in a retail purchase context”. Is this what the Prime Minister means by “improving the quality of our lives?” The funding of the studies mentioned alone comes to several times the funding of our Ensemble Studio, which is where we train the next Ben Heppner.

[To be perfectly accurate, I have to say that there are organisations in Canada (the NAC, Museum of Civilization, National Gallery), whose funding from the federal government ranges from 50% to 85% of their operating budget. They are an exception and I'm sure they need every bit of it, but what about other national institutions of international stature, who have something more like

5% - 10% subsidy and whose ticket sales compare closely with organisations with almost ten times their subsidy?]

At the COC, we had a 95% re-subscription rate last year. We had terrific single ticket sales with an unprecedented number of tickets sold to young people. We are *per force* spending less on artists and productions than 10 or 12 years ago – and yet we still can't balance our budget, and for the last five years we have had to use something called “transition funding to the new opera house” – effectively, we are borrowing from Peter to pay Paul.

Would a change in tax incentives, on the American model, help? – something which Don Johnson has championed so splendidly. Probably. But the years it would take to significantly change Canada's philanthropic philosophy to the American model would leave precious little stuff in our arts organizations by the time it had been achieved. And, anyway, the arts should never be held hostage to the whims of the market, nor should we be beholden to the tastes of individual donors—look at the mess at the Met, which is being sued by Sybill Harrington's estate because the Met used her money to do something slightly untraditional, which is not what she gave her money for. Alberto Vilar told me that he was glad he didn't pay for the all-Canadian Carsen-Levine *Onegin* at the Met because it was too 'spare'. He said he liked to see plenty of evidence of what he'd paid for.

Of course we could increase ticket prices and at the COC the most expensive seats go first. But beware, the Met is in financial trouble, San Francisco Opera worse, and Chicago Lyric Opera scrambling—not because they’re badly managed, but because they have lived on the past and have not created an audience for the future, and if you are to create an audience for the future, you have to provide seats that are affordable. In our new house, there will be at every performance of the main season 120 extremely cheap seats, so no one who really wants to come to the opera need be excluded as long as they’re willing to queue up. A significant increase in government funding would allow us to provide far greater access, and whether it’s done with lottery money, as in the UK, gambling or hotel taxes, whatever, if the arts matter, instead of spouting lip service, let’s do something about it.

I’m fond of quoting Peter Brook the great theatre director, “the person who is touched by the transcendental nature of human experience, the why, forgets the how. On the other hand, anyone who is acclaimed as a good craftsman and a real professional carries the danger that through their craftsmanship, their professionalism, their routine, the great why shrinks to the proportions of the how”. There will be no renaissance without that sense of the ‘why’.

I think we sometimes forget that the arts, rather than being a sort of life support system (a “good thing”), are much more a reason to be alive. And if this

is true, why do we feel we have to justify funding the arts with economic impact arguments or advertising the arts as a form of cultural tourism. Don't misunderstand me—The Ontario Cultural Attractions Fund is doing something of real importance in attracting the world to Ontario to see the best that we can offer, but I don't think it's there primarily because this makes an attractive economic picture. I hope and believe that the artistic initiative is what matters and pride in Canada's cultural life.

“Great creators teach us how to live...dream dreams for us, shape our visions, sound our hopes and fears, write the history of our days, and rewrite the history of past days to light our present”....words of Andrew Porter in an introduction to a book by the composer Michael Tippett.

In that book Tippett writes, “I have been writing for forty years. During those years there have been huge and world-shattering events in which I have been inevitably caught up. I have gone on writing because I must. And I know that my true function within a society is to continue an age-old tradition ... to create images from the depths of the imagination and to give them form ...images of the past, shapes of the future. Images of vigour for a decadent period, images of calm for one too violent. Images of reconciliation for worlds torn by division. And in an age of mediocrity and shattered dreams, images of abounding, generous, exuberant beauty.”

That's why the arts matter and why funding them is a matter of urgent attention. Glorious new buildings there may be, but there'll be no cultural renaissance until we get our priorities straight. We need first to recognise the 'why'. The 'how' should really not be so very difficult.

