

Community Arts Network Reading Room

The Funder's Tale

By Dan Yashinsky



Ruth Howard's Jumblies Theatre production of "Bridge of One Hair," an arts project based in a Toronto Community Housing neighborhood and involving members of the Somali community.

Photo: Katherine Fleitas and Jumblies Theatre

In 2003, after 25 years of being a freelance storyteller, I decided to apply for a straight job. I saw an ad for Community Arts grants officer at Toronto Arts Council, did an interview and, to my real surprise, was accepted. But when I heard the news, I lost my voice for a week. This seemed like an ominous portent to someone who was already ambivalent about such a major career shift. ("You have a dental plan now!" my partner reminded me, kindly refraining from pointing out it was mainly her full-time job, not my intermittent artist's income, that had kept our family afloat for twenty years.)

I sat at my desk for the first few weeks, trying to learn how to run Filemaker Pro and wrestle with Excel spreadsheets, and wondering if I'd ever tell another story to another listener. I stared at our application form's four Columns of Bureaucratic Doom — last year's actuals, current budgeted, current projected actuals, request year projected — and grieved for all the good wondertales and creation myths I was sure were going to wither in my repertoire. When friends congratulated me for getting the job (the ones who didn't tease me about crossing to the "dark side"), I bemoaned the loss of my freedom and felt like I'd betrayed my life's mission. The various arts councils are, of course, staffed by a motley crew of artists-turned-funders, and at TAC we'd sometimes encourage each other by remembering all the great artists in history who had day jobs. Chaucer ran the wool customs office for the King of England. Ezra Pound taught ESL. T.S. Eliot worked in a bank. But this was scant comfort for someone who, despite the undeniable benefit of a steady paycheck, would have been happier standing in a school gym telling fairytales to 15-year-olds (like me, they're skeptical at first, then committed).

Despite the rocky start, my voice did come back, and I eventually found a balance between the job, now part-time, and my storytelling work. My employer is generous about letting me travel to festivals or take time off for writing. I've even been able to work as the 2006 Toronto Public Library's storyteller-in-residence. I've also come to realize that my work as a community-arts funder partakes of the same set of values as my storytelling. Artists who work in and for community are enabling groups to tell — or sing, dance, film, paint, enact, sculpt - their collective story.

Another great thing about my job is that I can help artists make a living. For better or worse, grants officers ("Officer?" said one bemused applicant, who had served as a sergeant in the Israeli army, "For this they call you 'officer'") — or, more accurately, the juries we convene and support — are the Medicis of the

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community arts movement. Corporate philanthropy, with a few notable exceptions like the Laidlaw Foundation, hasn't lined up to provide support for unglamorous community-based art, and it's hard to raise much earned revenue from a mosaic unveiling, a half-year theater project with refugees, a storytelling program for Afghani and Tamil seniors, or a hip-hop workshop for impoverished teenagers. Grants are how most community-based artists earn their daily bread. Although the funding available in Toronto is still far short of what the artists need and are ready for, it has been satisfying to work toward expanding TAC's community arts program budget. It has increased by almost 50% from 2003 to 2006, from \$561,300 to \$810,000 (Canadian).

I know the importance of grants first-hand, having received my share of them (rejections, too) throughout my career, sometimes at moments of acute financial peril. When the Ontario Arts Council gave me a Works-in-Progress grant to help finish my book "Suddenly They Heard Footsteps" Storytelling for the Twenty-first Century," I was getting daily calls from Revenue Canada and Visa for unpaid taxes and bills. I saw the check and nearly wept with relief and jubilation.

The most interesting part of my work is conversing with artists and animators and community leaders about their work. My education as a funder has come out of these conversations, and whatever knowledge I've gained about community arts has come from listening to how the artists themselves describe their philosophy, practice and passion for the work.

Beauty and those Beastly Definitions: What is community arts?

When I began my job, I sought out artists and animators and asked them to explain the term "community arts." I quickly encountered a plethora of descriptions and names for the field. Even my program, after a review by an advisory group comprising some renowned artists and theorists, had recently been renamed Community Arts (from Arts in the Community). The guidelines they developed, after a year's worth of discussion, stated: "In essence, Community Arts provides participants ways to experience the arts that are democratic, interactive, communicative, transforming, often delightful, and often with a critical edge." It struck me at the time that, with all due respect to the advisory group, conveying the "essence" of something shouldn't take such an over-abundance of adjectives.

I have since read all the manifestos, newsletters (including the excellent one published by Community Arts Network), studies and reports I could find. In the 2006 program review the Canada Council for the Arts commissioned for its Artists and Community Collaboration Fund, author Laurie McGauley writes:

[T]here is a wide spectrum of objectives, approaches, and intentions for the work. I think that most of them [i.e. the community-based artists] would agree that these practices involve artists and communities in some form of collaborative creation of meaning, of beauty, and/or truth. Beyond that, the languages to describe and understand these approaches to art making are still evolving with the myriad ways of doing the work. Perhaps ironically for a discipline grounded in communal accomplishment, there doesn't seem to be much common ground among its leaders.

There are those who state that community arts must be a work of social and political transformation. They prefer to call it "community cultural development," or "cultural animation." A new grant program from Vancouver follows this line of thinking and refers to "art-based community development." According to these theorists/practitioners, the artist's role is to support and lead community members not only in an artistic production but simultaneously in a process that strengthens their sense of community, develops self-awareness and enables participants to articulate and achieve social and economic betterment. The measure of successful cultural animation is found in the changes participants are able to make in their lives through their involvement with an artistic experience.

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I've met equally accomplished practitioners who eschew the political dimension of this work, and are happy to be gentle guides to the realm of the beautiful. If pressed, some of them admit that beauty itself has a radically transformative power. As one

Jumbli's Theatre production of "Bridge of One Hair." Photo: Katherine Fleitas and Jumbli's Theatre

participant at Creative Works Studio (an arts program run out of St. Michael's Hospital community psychiatry program) averred, "Beauty gets me out of bed in the morning." These artists don't necessarily use the term "community arts" or "cultural animation" to describe their work. They simply say they are artists who do their creative work in collaboration with people in community settings. Ruth Howard, one of Toronto's most experienced and creative practitioners, describes herself as a "community-engaged artist," but confesses that even that somewhat infelicitous term doesn't really capture the nature of her approach. Yes, she engages with a community group — for example, the people living near Davenport-Perth Neighbourhood Centre, where her group Jumbli's Theatre has had a multi-year residency; or the residents of a Toronto Community Housing complex in south Etobicoke. But what she prefers is to define herself simply as an artist. At the recent Creators and Communities symposium, hosted by Toronto Arts Council Foundation, Ruth voiced her hope that one day the field would outgrow the need to qualify the art with the word "community." It would be common knowledge that an artist can work for gallery exhibits or stage production or in collaboration with their neighbors and fellow citizens.

Many of the creators in the field do, of course, have careers in theater, storytelling, literature, painting, filmmaking and so on. As a storyteller, for example, I've been working in community settings for many years without ever calling myself a community artist. I do a storytelling project I call a Telling Bee, where a group collects, tells, writes and publishes its oral stories: a community arts program par excellence. But there have never been any strict divisions or definitions between the various parts of my career, and making a living has always been, as it is for many artists, a catch-as-catch-can affair of whatever work I could find: concerts, community work, festivals, schools, libraries, special projects, radio, writing, commission, (and even taking on part-time work as a grants officer!). Only when I began funding it, did I discover I had been doing "community arts" all along without having a name for it.

So, what is the nature of a discipline that can generate such a wide range of self-descriptions? Why is community arts so difficult to encapsulate and define? It is important to remember that any artist working in community settings in the early 21st Century is a pioneer. These questions about purpose, process and definition are a sign of healthy evolution, not, as they can be in more established artforms, a dreary symptom of competing doctrines and dogmas.

Doing it for the Village

It's not that this is a novel artistic approach in human history. Artists have often, and in many cultures, expressed their creativity at a community level. South African theater artist John Kani (who also served as chair of their National Arts Council), described in a Globe and Mail interview the place of artists in African village culture:

Africa is different. There is no Broadway, and the community is what is important. When you become an artist, you become an artist in that village — a storyteller, a dancer, an entertainer, a percussionist. You're doing it for the village. The fact that it may be seen by people coming from the neighboring village is just another embellishment.

However, in our society, which has seen such rapid and drastic erosions of community life, this is a relatively recent discipline. I'm often reminded of a story I heard from my friend Ron Evans, a Metis oral historian, about the time an anthropologist came to an African village. They had just acquired their first television set and, for several weeks, they spent most of their time watching it. They neglected the old man by the fire, the *griot* who knew all of the tribe's history and mythology. But, after awhile, people drifted back to the fire, and eventually there was no one left by the television. The anthropologist, curious, asked one of the villagers, "Don't you think the TV knows more stories than your old storyteller?" "Oh, yes," came the reply. "The TV knows more stories, but the storyteller knows me." Perhaps this need for immediate, intimate, neighbor-to-neighbor, homegrown culture is what gives force to the contemporary community arts movement.

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As a funder, it has been necessary for me find a nonpartisan framework for understanding the diverse practices and philosophies that mark community arts at this point in its evolution. After observing a wide

range of Toronto-based arts projects and organizations, I will venture to say that the essence of this work is that artists working with community members extend the expressive vocabulary of the participants. It's a simple but useful truth about community arts. The *raison d'être*, the soul of community arts is to enable the group to gain a richer, deeper, more eloquent language of the imagination as a result of the art-making experience. What community members then choose to "speak" about (or dance, paint, sing, film, etc.) is, as it were, a secondary question. They may, and probably will, use this newly developed vocabulary in many, mostly unpredictable, ways. How and if it comes into play in the realms of social justice, social betterment, cultural affirmation, political action or purely subjective revelation may be somewhat out of the artist's control.

Although a good deal of art done in the name of "community cultural development" or "community arts" has a socially transformative purpose, art has a way of resisting value-added goals and messages. Will community arts produce concrete and measurable change in our social habitat? Perhaps. But what it will undeniably do, beyond all theories and definitions, is give us new ways, hard as they may be to measure, to express why those changes are necessary and new ways to make them. And at the most personal and intimate level, it may simply help a participant get out of bed in the morning for sheer love of beauty. My point is that the added values of social change and/or soul-transformation are built on the fundamental principle that making art in a community setting with a skilled artist as leader, will catalyze participants to find new ways to give voice to their individual and collective experiences. They gain and use a new language, a new vocabulary of the imagination, in whatever art form they may be working. Community Arts Ontario ran a conference in May, 2003, and the two keynotes were American curator Mary Jane Jacob and Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer. Both of them gave brilliant talks, and their insights have guided my own thinking ever since. Jacob described her work curating a number of community-based arts projects for the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. The quality her artists shared, besides their tremendous creativity, was their ability to listen to community members. They didn't go into their respective neighborhoods or community groups with preformed ideas. They initiated, with Jacob's guidance, a conversation, and from this process the artwork emerged. In every case, this process was anything but straightforward. Like all good conversations, the artist and the community members spent a long time discovering each other's interests, talents and common vision. In his talk, Schafer exemplified this way of working. He described a community choir that he founded in a small Ontario town. Meeting people at their own musical level, working slowly and patiently, he was able to incubate and hatch some extraordinary musical — and neighborly — experiences.

When I heard these two talks at the beginning of my work as a funder, it struck me very forcefully that, when artists of this caliber build a relationship in and with a community, wonderfully creative work will take place. Kristen Fahrig, a community-based artist who does projects in Toronto parks, was thinking of applying for a Community Arts Residency grant. I asked her what she was planning to do. "How can I know ahead of time?" she answered. "I have to talk to the people in the neighborhood first." I've seen the fruits of such deeply collaborative work in projects all over Toronto. Ruth Howard brings Somali women together to explore poetry and textile art. She didn't know ahead of time, but quickly learned in her contact with this community, that poetry is the central cultural expression for Somalis. Leah Burns, who did a mural project with youth at FoodShare's Field to Table warehouse, states: "When I create artwork, I am contributing to an ongoing conversation." As a funder, I'm guided by the profound belief that creative people will do imaginative and unprecedented work, whether the artistic production is destined for concert stages and art galleries, or whether it is done, like Kani's African village artists,



Archway by Kristen Fahrig in Toronto's Sorauren Park. Photo by Kristen Fahrig

by, for and with your neighbors and fellow villagers.

Form & Venue, or Boogeying up the Beach

One of the least discussed but, to me, most interesting questions for artists making art in and for community is which forms of art-making are the most rewarding and expressive in this context. Why, for example, is chamber music not a well-known community art, while mosaics, murals and choral music are? The simple answer is, of course, that chamber music requires specialized knowledge and skill to be performed with any pleasure for the player and (especially!) the listener. A mosaic draws on a fundamentally human ability to recognize and manipulate color, shape and pattern. In my work at Toronto Arts Council, I've seen exceptional projects that employ the following arts: mosaic, theatre, choral singing, percussion, storytelling, poetry, spoken word, mural-painting, contemporary dance. I haven't seen any community-based projects involving classical ballet, chamber or symphonic music, "academic" (for want of a better term; I mean "studied mainly by graduate students") verse or gallery-quality drawing. This isn't to say a gifted choreographer won't one day use ballet to animate a grassroots arts project. We know that dance can work marvelously at a community level, with artists like Judith Marcuse and Liz Lerman working with an incredible range of participants. But they don't tend to get their people up on point.

The arts that seem to work best at a highly participatory level are the ones that people already know how to do. They draw on an expressive vocabulary that is hardwired into our bodies, souls and voices: rhythm, color, pattern recognition, role-playing, vivid and memorable speech (i.e., for poetry and storytelling), an ability to shake, shimmy and move to music. When a community artist brings his/her creative energy to a group of fellow citizens, they awaken and conjure forth an inherent capacity for the artistic modes that have belonged to the human race since we boogied and hummed our way up the beach from the primordial bog, doodling in the sand all the way.

Another attribute of community arts is that the end results are always "more" or should be "more" than the sum of their parts. A participatory mosaic can be constructed by a large number of individual pieces, only some of which are distinguished in a conventional aesthetic sense. Yet, placed in the context of the whole piece, even the less skillful bits have their place, and the finished mosaic can be astonishingly beautiful and satisfying.

- Red Pepper Spectacle Arts, a Toronto-based arts company, did a community-wide mosaic project at St. Stephen's Community House, in the heart of Kensington Market. Every participant in every program designed and created a part of the mosaic, which is called River of Dreams. It winds through each floor of the three buildings that comprise St. Stephen's, and is an eloquent record of this diverse community's collective vision. When you behold the art, you don't see a series of individual pieces; you see the aptly named "river" of color and pattern flowing through the halls and rooms.
- I saw this process at the Villawayz Community Arts Centre, located in a bleak Toronto Community Housing area in the inner suburbs of Toronto. The animator, Suzie Tarlattini, had young people in the neighborhood do poetry, photography, oral-history collection and visual art

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River of Dreams project by Red Pepper Spectacle Arts. Photos courtesy of Red Pepper Spectacle Arts

for about a year. They created the Villawayz Community Album, which everyone in the neighborhood received. The book as a whole is a moving, funny, wise and beautiful chronicle of a community that faces extreme challenges. Like the community it celebrates, the Album is very much more than the sum of its parts.

- The Four in Hand storytellers, working as artists-in-residence at Rexdale Women's Centre (which serves one of Toronto's most impoverished and multicultural neighborhoods), brought together an amazingly diverse group of seniors, and helped them share their folk traditions. Many of them had never told their stories here in Toronto. Hearing and telling their stories, they began to create a new oral tradition, one that could only have sprung forth from the Rexdale community they all live in.

Slow Art

I want to end these observations by commenting on the place of the professional artist and animator in community arts. In the successful projects that TAC has funded, there is always an animator working alongside the artist. The role of the animator is to bring the artist and the community members together, build trust and mutual respect, ensure the group stays cohesive and inclusive, make sure there are cookies and bus tickets, observe and help evaluate the work. For the field to develop to its fullest potential, I think funders have to understand the necessity of the animator's role, as well as that of the artist.

We also have to recognize and honor the role of artistic mastery in community arts. Sometimes I've seen artists downplay their leadership role, as if it's bad grace to claim too much credit for a collaborative production. They are the opposite of Yogi Berra, who claimed, on winning the World Series, that "I couldn't do it without the players."

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But it is precisely this opportunity for community members to work alongside exceptionally creative artists that can give such a thrill to community arts. My friend, dancer Rina Singh, was in the Himalayan foothills studying traditional dance forms. She was visiting a certain town where the greatest percussionist of the region happened to work at a private school. It was a festival day, and Rina saw that many young girls were practicing their dance on a lawn beside the school. The great artist noticed them, stopped what he was doing, picked up a drum and began to play for a meadowful of five-year-olds. Afterwards, Singh asked him why he, who was such a renowned virtuoso, played for the children. "The youngest ears," he replied, "must hear the best."

It is the same when a gifted artist brings his/her expressive forces into a community level. It isn't a matter of setting up a hierarchy of talent, or using the old, romantic model of the Artist Hero. Of all people working in the arts, community artists are the first to resist the top-down model of art making. Yet it is vital to acknowledge the truth that gaining skill and wisdom in any of the arts takes a long time. Artists serve long apprenticeships, and becoming an artist is a complex, arduous process. While celebrating the great accomplishments and talents of participants, we must equally honor the mastery of the artists who instigate and guide such work. Not all artists, of course, choose to do collaborative work, nor have all artists the passion and patience to lead hundreds of participants in a mosaic project, or coax moving verse out of shy teenagers, or listen to the folktales carried by Afghani and Tamil seniors. Those who do choose to use their creativity in this way have, in addition to their artistic proficiency, an extraordinary capacity to listen to the hidden stories, the quieter voices of the community. This way of working should be recognized — and supported — as much as the art shown on gallery walls or presented on concert stages.

Learning to fund community arts is a work in progress, reflecting the experimentation and continuous re-invention that marks the field itself. The heart of the work depends on artists and community members having the time to build a creative relationship, and time, for freelance artists trying to feed their kids, is quite literally money. If I may go back to Africa for a last proverb, a man from Ghana once told me, "The white man has the watches, but the black man has the time." It is a good lesson for community-arts funders. You could almost call this kind of artistic work the "slow art" movement. Building trusting and creative relationships with community members takes time, and then more time. There are no shortcuts or instant results. Only if they have enough time can artists and participants catalyze mutual discoveries, bring all their skills and ideas to the work, make something beautiful and spark change in the community. In Toronto, and across Canada, I've been privileged to meet some wonderfully gifted artists; the cooks, as it were, who are able to prepare — slowly, and, one hopes, with decent grant support -- great artistic feasts with the whole community working together in the kitchen.

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