

*Why is conservative Alberta
a hotbed of artistic celebrations?*

inlovewith festivals

by Pamela Anthony

Alberta loves arts festivals. Estimates from the province assert upwards of 2.3 million people attended arts festivals last year. There are 48 established arts festivals across the province, with more cropping up every year. And that doesn't include the rodeos, the busy pow wow circuit or commercial "fests" also thriving here.

The popular response to arts festivals—from folk festivals to capital A art events—sets Alberta apart.

Many observers simply point to the quality and diversity of artistic programming, as if to say, What's not to like? For instance, Edmonton's Folk Festival, one of the world's biggest folk events (some say best) regularly presents big concert names like Elvis Costello, Joni Mitchell, k. d. lang, Sinéad O'Connor and Joan Baez. In Calgary the High Performance Rodeo

curates an adventurous two-week program of leading-edge performance art every January. PlayRites, a hot new-play festival, draws theatre aficionados from across the

country. The Banff Television Festival, a high profile industry schmooze-fest in the mountains, generates Hollywood buzz. And the Street Performers Festival hosts an international cast of street entertainers for ten days of completely accessible and often outrageous fun in downtown Edmonton every year, rain or shine.

Across the province, there are hot jazz festivals, experimental film binges, bluegrass extravaganzas, outdoor classical music happenings, big-time author celebrations, three Shakespeare festivals, some of the best children's programming anywhere, and a Fringe Festival that is North America's largest theatre event, period.



Fort Macleod's South Country Fair



The Edmonton Folk Festival, one of the world's biggest and best folk events, presents big concert names.

Populist and sophisticated cultural programming of this magnitude is a phenomenon in Alberta that goes largely unheralded. The rest of the country seems unaware of Alberta as a hotbed of artistic celebrations—only Quebec exceeds Alberta in the number of festivals produced annually. Alberta is generally viewed as a stronghold of conservative politics and market driven public policies. And yet, here is this wealth of culturally adventurous and popular festivals.

What's going on? What makes arts festivals thrive in Alberta?

Dick Finkel, a well-known festival guru in the province, is famous for saying, "All it takes is one crazed individual who won't take no for an answer." His remark is borne out by the fact that many festivals have their original producers still at the helm—passionate, committed individuals whose belief in the festival model of arts presenting has created an industry.

David Cheoros, the director of the Edmonton Fringe, thinks a social phenomenon is at work, one a bit more subtle than provincial stereotypes would sug-

gest. "It's not a coincidence that festivals do well in Alberta. There is a strong sense of individualism, combined with a strong sense of community," he says. "Those qualities are not mutually exclusive at all."

JoAnne James, director of the Calgary Children's Festival, agrees, saying Alberta has an approach to festivals that reflects a distinct provincial mentality. "I think the Alberta festival style is very confident, a bit cocky. We're under the gun a lot, but we make it work," she says. "And there is this incredible open-heartedness in the people here. Volunteerism drives these events."

Anecdotes about the "people power" that fuels festivals are plentiful, and they are supported by attendance figures and volunteer records. An estimated 189,691 hours of volunteer labour greases the festival industry wheel. Terry Wickham of the Edmonton Folk Festival, which has a volunteer base of 1,800 people, puts his job in perspective. "I work for volunteers, probably the strongest festival volunteer base in the world," he says. "Every time we ask them to do more, they do it, come back and say, 'What else?' The spirit

"All it takes is one crazed individual who won't take no for an answer."

Edmonton Int'l Street Performers Festival



they bring to the festival is unbelievable.”

Although the grassroots, community-based tradition of festivals in Alberta is now strong, it was, ironically, an outpouring of government money and top-down cultural policy initiatives that kick-started the festival scene. The Alberta government’s spending to celebrate the province’s 75th Anniversary in 1980 was a milestone for promotion of culture in the province: 75 million dollars were poured into the celebrations. Suddenly the government was funding festivals, touring artists, underwriting concerts, and creating community heritage and cultural events across the province. This dizzying infusion of cash had immediate and lasting impact on the development of arts organizations in the province. Festivals in particular were a hit with the people of Alberta, and most of the province’s leading festivals were born as a direct or indirect result of that seed money.

The current funding scenario is less rosy. The province’s festival funding is distributed by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, where arts funding has been frozen since 1991. Of the \$15-million in gaming revenue distributed by the AFA, \$795,000 is allocated to arts festivals. Faced with a burgeoning sector of the arts industry, AFA simply spreads the money further every time a new festival comes along.

Plenty of statistics confirm the economic importance of the arts festival industry in Alberta, and the festivals have used them time and again in an attempt to stimulate increased funding. “The arguments are strong, but they don’t work,” says JoAnne James, a veteran festival director who is also a founder and former chair of the Alberta Arts Festivals Association, the industry’s network of festival organizations. “Festivals have grown by leaps and bounds, but funding hasn’t. Even in a province as rich and well endowed as this one, we see festival support shrinking. I find it inescapably frustrating.”

Festival funding disparities can be a “don’t get me started” topic for most festival directors. And the Edmonton/Calgary comparisons are stark. It’s “a tale of two cities” says Wickham, who works in both centres. Although Edmonton is a less economically energetic city, it is years ahead of Calgary in developing festivals. In 1981 Edmonton kick-started a deliberate process of festival development that continues to this day. “City of Champions” may be a disputed tag for Edmonton these days, but with 19 established and nine emerging arts festivals on the calendar, “Canada’s Festival City” is a slogan with the ring of truth.

Edmonton festivals share \$887,000 in annual funding from the City through the Edmonton Arts Council, with grants of up to \$129,000 awarded to major events. By contrast, Calgary spends just under \$200,000 on arts festivals.

“Calgary is short-sighted; it can’t see past the Stampede,” says Calgary Folk Music Festival’s associate producer Kerry Clarke. Her festival receives \$20,000, just

2 per cent of their budget, from the City—less than it receives from any other level of government. Then there are “all the rules,” from sound bylaws to park land use, that further handicap festival development. “The City doesn’t make it easy for festivals to exist here, even though this is where we live and work, where we program from, and it’s the community we give the most benefit to,” says Clark.



The Street Performers Festival is 10 days of outrageous fun in downtown Edmonton

Funding issues haven’t put a dent in the solidarity of the closely networked festivals in Alberta. Examples abound of established events sharing experience and hard-won resources with emerging festivals—despite the depressing reality that another successful festival will simply mean less money for everyone else.

Festivals thrive because a great many Albertans have, over the past two decades, developed a taste for festivals. David Cheoros tells a story that reinforces this observation. He once grabbed a cab to get to a meeting at the Arts Barns, located in the heart of Edmonton’s Old Strathcona district. The voluble driver, recognizing the requested destination as ground zero for Edmonton’s Fringe Theatre Festival, regaled Cheoros with his opinion of a Fringe play he’d seen. He also added, with an authority that would make the tourism bureau proud, that Edmonton’s Fringe was the biggest in North America.



Originally designed to beautify downtown and stimulate interest in the visual arts, The Works now reinvents itself each year.

Cheoros, head of that very festival, was thrilled. It confirmed for him once and for all that the Fringe—a populist, freewheeling event he shepherds towards reality each year—is truly an integral part of the community. “Cab drivers who review plays: I love that. I love that,” says Cheoros. “And that’s not a solitary incident. Fringe patrons are not necessarily regular theatre goers—I talk to the most extraordinary range of people about the Fringe. A very broad community takes pride in the festival.”

Talk to festival organizers across Alberta and you inevitably hear this kind of prototypical story—the one that reveals a deeply rooted public interest in festivals.

JoAnne James says there are many such moments, and amid all the pressures of fund-raising and festival production, she’s grateful for them. “A woman once came up to me and told me that she had been bringing her daughter to the festival for nine years as her birthday celebration. She was thanking me because she felt that their memories would last a lifetime.”

Defying yet another stereotype of Alberta’s political landscape, public support of festivals is not confined to urban centres. Music festivals in particular appeal to folks throughout the province, from South Country Fair in Fort Macleod and the Shady Grove Festival in Nanton, to

the Jasper Folk Festival and North Country Fair at Lesser Slave Lake. The Blueberry Bluegrass Festival in Spruce Grove is another example. Checking out the licence plates in the dusty parking lot of this festival reveals a quiet success story that draws fans from across North America. The Canmore Folk Festival is a little-known national treasure, set in a beautiful small town park dramatically framed by the Rockies. This ambitiously programmed festival makes the mountains literally ring with music.

Terry Wickham, who has helped put Alberta festivals on the international map, says the success of festivals can be attributed to a refined knack for putting on a really good show. “The best marketing is good programming,” he says. “If you look at the successful

People power fuels festivals — thousands of hours of volunteer labour

Canmore Folk Festival



festivals, it's the quality of the experience that brings people back again and again."

JoAnne James has another take, one that speaks to a profound sense of community.

"What I've come to understand about festivals is they are a unique opportunity to celebrate together," she says. "They're concentrated periods of joy."

Art festivals in Alberta are a cultural hybrid: born of government initiative, driven to artistic excellence by individual passions, and sustained by an exceptional level of public involvement. The festivals have deep roots in the province, and under the wide open sky they flourish.

Here are profiles of four festivals upcoming this season:

The Works

Walking around downtown in Edmonton during The Works is good exercise for the mind. You might encounter satirical exhibits of "money lures," bright flourishes of shredded currency tied to hooks, in the bank. Wander into a room-size installation of large-scale calligraphy at an upscale mall, or watch Warhol-inspired performances on a sunny afternoon in Churchill Square. And that's without even trying. If you're an art aficionado, you could seek out media-art projects in alleys, junk-art projects in abandoned urban spaces, or even, perhaps, paintings in a gallery.

The Works, A Visual Arts Celebration, is unique among festivals in Alberta, and the only event in North America dedicated solely to art. For nearly two weeks, contemporary visual art—and artists—are in the spotlight. "The Works offers the visual arts community a place to celebrate together, to bring art to the street, to experiment, bring out their creative process in a forum that doesn't exist anywhere else," says The Works Artistic Director Vincent Gasparri. "I would call the festival an alternative setting for art."

Originally designed to beautify downtown and stimulate interest in the visual arts, The Works now reinvents itself each year, often around a conceptual framework. The 100 or more exhibits are organized through a large network of partnerships with venues, businesses, schools, art organizations and funders.

Like most festivals, it takes an army of volunteers from the community to help run the event. But good intentions and self-motivation occasionally run amuck. Gasparri laughs as he talks about a contemporary installation/performance project by Blair Brennan and Brian Webb that involved a great deal of broken glass. A volunteer arriving for his shift at the venue thought there had been some sort of party incident; he carefully swept up and disposed of all the glass. Gasparri was alerted when he heard the volunteer on radio, calling for more garbage cans. The glass was replaced in time for the evening's performance.

The festival has not been without controversy. A show

in 1997 representing goddess images was challenged by Ty Lund, who said The Works was a "festival of filth." Other tempests have come and gone. But The Works remains, evolving with the city's downtown landscape.

"We've been operating in the mainstream for a long time, and we've been able to exercise a lot of artistic licence in that time," says Gasparri. "I think The Works has educated the public about art, and sparked dialogue—it's that simple."



"A ten-year-old is just as important as a 50-year-old with a cheque book."

Calgary International Children's Festival

JoAnne James has a simple goal: she wants to change the world. And she's happy to do it one child at a time.

As the founding director of the 14-year-old Calgary International Children's Festival, James' mandate is simple and inspiring—to change the world by surrounding children with excellence.

Certainly, the world seems a better place when you're at the Calgary festival, which has earned a nationwide reputation for programming excellence. James, an accomplished playwright herself, is discerning and adventurous in her choices for children. She presents theatre, dance, puppetry and music from around the world, and is a passionate champion of cultural diversity and artistic excellence.

This year she programmed Number 14, a clown show about characters found on a Vancouver bus; and MacHomer, a witty, no-holds-barred spoof of the Scottish play in the personae of pop culture's most irreverent family, the Simpsons. There is, needless to say, no talking down to children at this festival.

Yet despite the obvious links to adult theatre, James rejects the notion that she is "developing" audiences of the future.



The Calgary Folk Festival keeps them coming back with good music and lots of it.

She thinks children are the audiences of now.

“A ten-year-old is just as important as a 50-year-old with a cheque book,” she says. “I’m quite a missionary about this. It’s very important to be really respectful of young minds. I hold it a high honour to select what they see, and I want them to experience the very best.” The Calgary Centre for the Performing Arts is an ideal venue for James, who wants children to have “a real, pure theatre experience,” as well as hands-on activities and festival-style tent performances. “For one week, this cultural palace belongs to children. For a city to erupt in celebration and joy around its children—what a great thing that says about a community.”

Calgary Folk Music Festival

Calgary’s Folk Festival sometimes seems like a well-kept secret.

A lot of folk fans are well aware of the event, which programs an intriguing mix of traditional folk, redefined folk and world music.

But despite a beautiful site in Prince’s Island Park, a small but mighty core audience, and a determined staff, the festival struggles. With the rain, the debt, the city bureaucracy, more rain—and the sometimes overwhelming reputation of the big folk festival to the north.

Ironically, it was an outpouring of government money that kick-started the festival scene.

Cariwest Festival in Edmonton



But Kerry Clarke, who has been with the festival for six years and is now associate producer, isn’t a bit worried. “This festival is strong,” she says. “It’s been around for 20 years. There’s an audience; if it weren’t for that audience, we wouldn’t exist. Good people, community, volunteers—that’s not going to change. The festival is here to stay.”

In fact, that is what Clarke likes to talk about: good music, and how much of it is on offer at the Calgary Festival. “I think it’s all about engaging the community in music,” she says. “This festival is developing its own flavour with cutting-edge artists, roots stuff, so-called alternative, international music. Calgary is strong in country, and that can work in our favour too.”

The folk label is obviously up for grabs.

“Folk music,” Clarke jokes, “is anything Terry and I book.”

Clarke shares a collaborative booking arrangement with Terry Wickham, who runs the Edmonton Folk Music Festival and now co-produces the Calgary Folk Festival. Wickham’s remedy for Calgary? Spend more money on talent. Book names that pull people in. If you’re \$100,000 in debt, you spend \$400,000 on talent to make it back. It’s a simple “build it and they will come” philosophy.

Les Siemieniuk, Calgary’s general manager, says it’s starting to have the desired impact in Calgary. “We’re trying to get to the point, like Edmonton, where the festival is weather-proof,” says Siemieniuk, who once watched it snow in July while k. d. lang was on the main stage. “We’re not quite there, but people were sitting through a downpour for Joan Baez last year. It’s about the experience you put on as a festival. If it’s good, they’ll want to be there.”

Festival organizers say they also build from the festival’s strengths: a beautiful site in Prince’s Island Park, and the festival’s beloved workshops. They’re the performances on small stages where unexpected magic happens through what Clarke calls “arranged marriages” between musicians. It’s a uniquely Canadian model, and one that continues to stir up the interest of artists. “It’s invaluable for artists and fascinating for audiences,” says Clarke. “Something unfolds in front of them; they’re part of it. It’s an experience you can’t replicate.”

The Edmonton Fringe Festival

It’s a monster, and it roars to life every summer.

The Edmonton Fringe Theatre Festival is North America’s biggest theatre party, a near-legendary celebration that now draws nearly half a million people to a small, funky neighbourhood on the south side of the city.

The festival hosts up to 120 theatre companies—all the outcome of a random, unjuried, uncensored selection process—performing everything from avant-garde circus to classical drama.

The indoor theatre performances compete with a wild street scene full of buskers and wandering crowds. The beer tents are packed, and the 11-day blowout often resembles a midway more than a theatre festival.

But the Fringe is a bona fide cultural success story. More than 65,000 tickets are sold in 10 days, the media attention is non-stop, and theatre reputations are made.

Edmonton’s Fringe is second in size and scope only to the Edinburgh Fringe, from which it was spawned in 1982. The father of the Canadian Fringe phenomenon is Brian Paisley. Inspired by the Edinburgh Fringe to make theatre more accessible for both artists and audiences at home, Paisley put a “Canadian spin” on the idea, and voilà, a new model for independent theatre in North

America was born.

Eighteen years later, Edmonton’s appetite for the Fringe only seems to grow. It has helped create a vibrant theatre community, and is in turn sustained by what Fringe director David Cheoros calls “a terrific community of artists. Success begets success. Suddenly, we’re not a little renaissance fair in a quiet neighbourhood,” Cheoros says. “We’re a major carnival in one of the most congested areas of the city.”



The Calgary International Children’s Festival has earned a nationwide reputation for programming excellence.

Cheoros has embraced the spectacle of the Fringe by naming this year’s edition *Cirque de Fringe*. Cheoros says it is his job to figure out how to create a sort of “internal coherence” for the event amid all the freewheeling chaos. “It’s the philosophical wires and ropes and glue of the Fringe, not evident to the public, but nonetheless essential to the success of the festival.” ✂

A comprehensive list of Alberta arts festivals can be found on pages 60-61. Pamela Anthony is an artist, writer and producer in Edmonton. One summer she attended 27 arts festivals in a row, and hasn’t been the same since.