

alberta VIEWS

JAN/FEB 2004 VOL. 7, NO. 1

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SUBSCRIPTIONS

In Canada \$24.34 per year (includes GST).
US subscribers pay in US dollars.
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Printed in Canada
GST Registration No. 86847 0469
ISSN No. 1480-3151



We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada toward our editorial costs through the Canada Magazine Fund.

Essences

by Jackie Flanagan



We used to play a game of metaphor called “essences” which had us contemplating such questions as, If your best friend were a vegetable, what would he be... an artichoke, asparagus, potato, turnip? In *Fear of Flying* the narrator compares lovers to cheeses: cheddar (Iowa farmhand), Velveeta (mama's boy in Peoria), Roquefort (Italian train conductor). Metaphors can be illuminating.

What is the essence of our province? If Alberta were a car, would it be a Honda, Cadillac, pick-up truck, SUV? If Alberta were a country, would it be Sweden, Italy or the United States? If Alberta were an occupation, would it be a seamstress (like the Philippines) or a banker (like England), or a no-nonsense, busy-as-a-beaver geophysicist? We know for sure it wouldn't be a dancer or a singer.

What kind of place are we and what kind of place do we want to be? In *Alberta's Camelot*, Fil Fraser fondly remembers a golden era of support for the arts during the Lougheed years. The province had exceptional vitality because “the government of the day created a supportive environment for its creative citizens.” The Alberta Foundation for the Arts began collecting the work of our painters, sculptors, photographers, ceramists and fibre artists. Alberta House in London, England's Trafalgar Square displayed the work of Alberta artists. The province provided \$75-million for Alberta's 75th anniversary celebrations in 1980. Many successful ongoing arts events such as the Edmonton Fringe theatre festival and various folk music festivals got their start at that time.

Today the province is not known for its encouragement of the arts. It seems we're all business and practicality. Education is about preparation

for the workforce, training people to do certain jobs. Preparation for a meaningful life is a luxury we can't afford. Learning to question and think doesn't receive emphasis in the curriculum, never mind learning to dance and sing. Today school principals are forced to choose between books or band. Arts organizations are told to operate like businesses.

When the Alberta Foundation for the Arts hadn't received an increase in its budget for years, they mounted a public relations poster campaign to encourage citizens to appreciate the arts. But we can't expect students to go through 12 or 16 years of schooling without any exposure to serious music, for example, and then to buy season tickets to the symphony after graduation.

Even philanthropists seem hostile to the arts. Donors to charitable foundations make the condition that not one penny is to go to cultural endeavours. Funds must go to worthy causes like health, social services, the alleviation of hunger.

Many years ago an art consultant came out from Calgary to an impoverished school in an outlying town and gave the children some brushes and paints, played Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* and said “paint what the music makes you see.” I was in that class. It is the only day in the entire school year that stands out in my memory.

Man does not live by bread alone. Our wealth could offer something for the spirit as well. Surely in Alberta we could be not only consumers, but creators of culture. We could nurture the imaginations of our children, encourage creativity, support our artists. We could find different metaphors to capture our essence than “redneck” and “right wing.”