

BOHEMIAN BOOSTERISM

Does solid footing on the Bo-Dex really mean our cities are creative?

by Kevin Brooker • Illustrations by James Grasdal

Last summer Albertans were feeling pretty chuffed about themselves, on something akin to a sugar high from a chunk of academic marzipan circulating through the news cycle. It had to do with the findings of Richard Florida, a professor at Carnegie-Mellon University, who in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* and subsequent investigations analyzed North American cities to determine which social factors were most amenable to developing the New Economy, or whatever it is that municipal mandarins call sexy, knowledge-based businesses.

Florida ultimately identified three essential factors and developed scales to measure them. The first two are fairly straightforward. The “Mosaic Index” assesses the diversity of the population; greater human variety and tolerance are said to enhance sophisticated forms of enterprise. Likewise, the “High-Tech Pole Index” graphs the concentration of talent in areas like computer science and bio-tech. The more nerds the better, presumably.

But it was the third designation, Florida’s so-called “Bohemian Index,” which provoked all the self-congratulatory chatter. The Bohemian Index, or Bo-Dex, as it may soon be abbreviated in civic marketing pamphlets, charts the relative preponderance in the general population of artists and their creative fellow travellers. I don’t know how you count them, but no matter. The *mirabile dictu* was that out of 49 city-regions on this continent whose populations fall between 500,000 and one million, my little cowtown Calgary ranked a whopping fourth on the Bo-Dex. Edmonton, which I would have guessed to be ahead of us, came in at a still-respectable eighth.



To be honest, my first reaction was “Take that, Tulsa!” But other, more generous commentators were over the moon. Here was another smoking gun in our restless search for evidence of world-class stature. While few noted that these ordinals placed us behind such famous hotbeds of the underground as Las Vegas and Nashville, or asked why skanky New Orleans ranked a white-bread 41st, science had spoken. The fact remained that Alberta positively brims with South Asian code-jockeys and radical ceramists and obsessively professional stage managers and, of course, cab loads of gay luminaries plus all of their funky cafés. So, by God, upstart software companies should be pounding down our doors.

FRANKLY, I DIDN’T NEED A U.S. PROFESSOR to tell me that Calgary behaves far more like Berlin than like Denver or Phoenix. For in spite of my natal skill at self-deprecation, I have had my own epiphanies about my province’s mushrooming bohemian class.

One particularly startling episode occurred in the early ’90s, on a warm September evening in Lethbridge. We’d driven there for an opening at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, where I had to mask my surprise at how cool the art was, and that the crowd was even more so. I probably even asked the question often heard in large Alberta parties filled with hip-looking swells: “Where do all these people come from?”

In fact, said my companions, who were considerably less peripheral to the *beau monde* than I, Lethbridge’s art community is disproportionately large and well-ensconced.

Thanks to a foresighted curator taking full advantage of oil-boom petro-dollars, for example, the University of Lethbridge happens to own one of North America's pre-eminent collections of contemporary art.

I got a further taste of it when the entourage to which I now belonged (who knew the 'Bride even had entou-rages?) headed just out of town to a more sumptuous reception hosted by local patrons. Though situated on a flat, treeless prairie, their house was immensely beautiful, the kind of low-slung, Wrightian architecture you might expect to see in West Vancouver or Oakville. There was also what looked like a million-dollar sculpture garden in the courtyard, and more fabulous *objets* inside. I remember at one point admiring a teakwood magazine rack stocked with all the tony titles, when I noticed the portrait of a bearded painter on the cover of that month's *Canadian Art*. When my gaze returned to the buffet, I couldn't believe my eyes: there, picking away at the salmon, was the selfsame dude.

Later we drove back downtown to a loft party above a Chinese restaurant. Here was another fresh crop of hipsters, with two art-school bands that kicked in around 2 a.m. and raged all night. Now this, I concluded in the golden dawn, is my idea of an agricultural service centre.

In many ways, that experience mirrored others I'd had visiting Edmonton over the years. Of course, as a Calgarian, I had been programmed to disdain our sister city. All it represented to me were two less-than-pleasant notions: the city that zoning forgot, and one whose athletic teams could kick our ass at will.

I date my abandonment of such prejudice to the first edition of the Edmonton Fringe Festival in 1983, which I happened to attend as an unpaid roadie for my theatre friends, One Yellow Rabbit. On the surface, it was less than auspicious. The venues included a derelict bank and a back-alley parking lot, while Fringe central was the lounge of a now-demolished Old Strathcona motor hotel. Indeed, sitting there drinking high-test with festival founder Brian Paisley, none of us could have predicted the imminent explosion of low-budget theatre combined with high-art aspirations—plus the will to make plays playful again—that I contend is Alberta's most distinguished cultural contribution of the past two decades.

Alternative theatre grew so big, so fast, that even I got involved. Five Fringes later I found myself back in Edmonton to see a city transformed. Theatre had been the bellwether, but arts of every kind were in full flower. You couldn't spill a cappuccino without soaking a Grant MacEwan grad. Edmonton was now a place for attending impossibly cool jazz sessions, or perhaps shopping for ultra-hip eyewear and Milano-worthy custom furniture. Yet I couldn't help wonder: if everyone's sitting around burning with a hard, gem-like flame, who's going to be left to take the oil out of the ground?

As for myself and my colleagues' little theatrical confection, although it somehow managed to sell out, when I read that Kate Zimmerman of the *Herald* dubbed it "a waste of

time," my tender little heart broke and I guess you could say I left the industry.

AH YES, THE INDUSTRY. I sometimes tease my thespian friends, God love them, with my routine greeting: "How's the show business?" It earns the consistent reply of a whimsically pained look that corrects me: "It's *theatre*, moron." Regrettably, few Albertans seem to consider that theatre is in fact an industry, including most of those who are in it. They may consider it a gift, a *métier*, a calling, a dodge, a sacred duty, even an alibi. But, judging from their pay stubs, they're pretty certain it's no business.

I'm not just picking on theatre. Creative pursuits of all kinds in this province are hobbled by a woeful lack of commercial infrastructure, or even the perceived need to build one. Our painters, too, can easily be co-opted by day jobs.



Sculptors get into medical prosthetics. Writers labour unrewarded, or turn to public relations. And everybody hopes to teach.

But it's useful to look at theatre as it's currently practised because it emblemizes the predicament faced by other Albertan creators. It is heavy on talent, but light on investment—it almost invariably constitutes itself as non-profit. It has often relied on government assistance to flourish. Its product is consumed here but rarely travels, profitably, out of the region. The net result is a low ceiling in terms of both international acclaim and remuneration.

It is no mystery, however, why so many talented young Albertans choose theatre as their path to the life in art that has become so socially desirable. To launch a career as

a novelist or composer is to commit to a long, possibly fruitless struggle. But in theatre, if what you do is original and good, you can earn vital approbation relatively early in the game, and even a meagre living, albeit before an audience of dozens as opposed to millions.

Here's where the happy endings break down, though. Our theatre is, according to a descriptor once imposed upon us but now all too often self-defined, regional theatre. The stories we restrict ourselves to are often immensely creative and idiosyncratic, but they are usually, for want of a better word, small. One sturdy play might have a future in, say, the Charlottetown Festival. But few Albertans look to markets south of the border, for example. And no local playwright, I submit, is sweating to produce the next *Cats*. Of course, if she did, we'd probably run her out of town. But still.



ME, I LEFT CALGARY FOREVER WHEN I WAS 21. Vancouver, Toronto, you know the drill; like our youth still do, I saw it as a duty. I've since learned that were it not for us provincials sending them our young and creatively hopeful, the limited art production of those cities would surely grind to a halt.

Although I returned, willingly and happily, I wish I could say that times have changed. Many of our best and brightest still take their ACAD diplomas and scam, though they walk like ghosts among us, their Manhattan successes celebrated in a breed of fawning profile nauseatingly endemic to Alberta. For what it's worth, those of you considering this exit strategy might reconsider. Because, even if all the stars align, the pinnacle of your future existence may involve little more than updating the look of Tide, or

persuading readers of *Toronto Life Fashion* that brown is the new black. Will that be, in the end, worth living in a rat-hole for \$1,250 a month?

Of course, you can always stay. But, for example, if my own experience in the tree-killing business is any indication, a viable market for freelance journalism is still a work in progress in this province. In 25 years in the business I have seldom cashed a cheque postmarked Alberta. The rates of pay on offer are almost always sub-professional. About the best you can say is that there is limited competition. When somebody at *Report on Business* magazine asks a colleague, "We need a Forzani profile. Do we know any writers out in Calgary?" the answer is apparently (and sadly) a very short list.

Meanwhile, the typical Albertan approach to for-profit publication is to launch an under-capitalized product churned out by entry-level staff and freelancers, all of whom are expected to sacrifice eternally, payment-wise, for the sake of literature. That and the privilege of seeing their heavily discounted words and pictures amid glossy ads for kitchen renovations they couldn't afford in 10 lifetimes.

Our local weekly offers a textbook case in the schizophrenia with which we treat our creative class. Although it is a relentless booster of arts of all kinds, the publication itself neither has, nor has ever had, its own art department or art director. Photoplay, feature design, clever typography: forget about it. It relies, for the most part, on free press-kit photographs to illustrate articles written by hungry young aspirants for fees roughly equal to a tip at a good restaurant.

Not that our daily newspapers offer much more of a plausible entrée to the writing life. There are few authentic local voices amongst all that trend-watching blather lifted from the *Orlando Sentinel*. Like all of the day-to-day media that might furnish launching pads for creative Albertans, our newspapers are mired in a perpetual branch-plant mentality. Owned by distant corporations, they are run by a revolving corps of slightly warm bodies who drift from market to market as if becoming an actual permanent resident represents career suicide. Why this doesn't bother us more can only be explained by the fact that 'twas ever thus. After all, when Grant MacEwan College christened the Leslie Nielsen School of Communications last fall, the chief critique was that it should have been named for a more august putative Edmontonian, like Marshal McLuhan. I didn't hear anyone point out that neither of those guys had much to do with the variants of journalism that the LNSC aims to foster.

Commercial newspapers have no obligation to develop local talent, but you would think it might make some sort of business sense. The CBC (both radio and television) could be an important avenue for the advancement of creative minds, and there the defence of private ownership doesn't apply. But as much as one might respect the Corp, it doesn't cultivate local talent. Whereas Newfoundland is deemed cute and an ever-reliable source of programming, Alberta is shunned by the CBC like a too-rich philistine undeserving of coast-to-coast exposure. Where is a talk

show based in Alberta? Does *our* bad comedy have a broadcast window? The fact is, no important national radio series originates here, nor have I ever seen a contemporary urban drama set in a realistic version of where I live. And if Newsworld Calgary provides anything other than a chance for a Toronto anchorperson to reduce his mortgage by 50 per cent, I'm not sure what it is.

ANOTHER ALBERTA MOMENT, this one from the mid-'90s: in the boardroom of a Calgary television station, a TV producer and I are meeting with the general manager. Seeking support for a cheesy but potentially commercial screen project—nowadays you'd pitch it as *Trailer Park Boys* meets *Temptation Island* in Banff, and it would still be pretty fun—we nevertheless don't expect much. By the time we leave it's easy to see why. The executive casually lets it drop that in the nearly 50-year history of that station, it has produced exactly one half-hour of dramatic programming.

"But if memory serves," he adds without an eyelash of irony, "it never aired."

And that's when it hits home. You thought you were a 21st century metropolis blessed with a rich cultural ferment, until you suddenly find out what you really are:

Spokane.

How else to explain why a television station that once sipped at the sweet nectar of *Stampede Wrestling* syndication evinced no further interest in developing commercial TV properties. Like their rival across town, they prosper airing network fare and producing news three times a day. Does such torpor depend on orders from head office or just force of habit? One thing's for sure. It's not for lack of creative people.

Alberta needs a real television and film industry, not to make us feel better about ourselves, but because it can be a lucrative value-added industry, generating international exports. But so far Albertans haven't done much to build one. We let Moses Znaimer scoop up the ACCESS network. New licences were claimed by A-Channel, then a Winnipeg enterprise. Here in Calgary we're still dreaming about a studio while foreign productions avail themselves of our splendid shooting environment and talented crews. The bottom line, though, is that there's something drastically wrong in a 500-channel country where 498 are located in Toronto. We have to do something about it.

Don't expect the government to help. When Klein and company nixed the sort of tax incentives granted to filmmakers by every other jurisdiction in Canada, it served notice about its true feelings concerning economic diversification. We're therefore left with a private-industry model. But the good news is, last time I checked, we appear to be swimming in cash. So where are the entrepreneurs? Do those with a spare 500 grand invest in oilfield trucking or a TV series production house? Risky as it might be, wouldn't that be cool?

Indeed there are dozens of areas of need, and potential. We don't just lack studios, we require support industries like talent agencies and entertainment law

firms. At present, Edmonton and Calgary have to be the most under-agented cities to be found this far up on the Bohemian Index. (Few of the actors I know have an agent, citing it as too much hassle for the rare but questionable rewards of a month's work as Seth Green's stand-in, or a chance to play Hippy Girl #3 in a TBS movie of the week.) But that can change.

How is it that, with its three or four tablespoons of talent, Nickelback in Alberta is just another mulleted bar band, but take it to L.A. and it's a worldwide smash. Private capital can do this, just as it can leverage a biotech start-up, an outdoor equipment factory, an international magazine, or a website with a limitless upside.

All we lack is the commercial will. Part of the reason, I think, is that corporate giving to culture, generous and wel-



come though it is, has caused too many of us to think of art as charity. When it comes to investing in for-profit creative endeavours, the easy out is: "My office gave at the office." Yet there's money to be made exploiting an abundant resource of creative talent. Who's going to claim some?

As for those of you who enrich our cultural stock, you too have obligations and opportunities. For one thing, you have the duty to think up creative new ways in which your beloved trade can pay you a living wage. You must also convince others to invest, and not just token sums. Only real, long-term cash can generate viable industries in the New Economy.

The time has come, my boho friends, to put a little cheese on the macaroni. 🧀

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