

# ARTS, SOCIAL ACTION, AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE HEART OF THE CITY FESTIVAL

by Savannah Walling

*For the third year running now, the Carnegie Community Centre and Vancouver Moving Theatre have been (through the Downtown Eastside Heart of the City Festival) exposing talent, promise and generosity of spirit where most of us had given up on finding anything but broken lives.*

John P. McLaughlin,  
*The Province*

The Downtown Eastside is arguably one of Vancouver's least understood and most publicized communities. Located on a spit of land on Burrard Inlet, it is the heart and birthplace of Vancouver. Since time immemorial, ancestors of Coast Salish people living here today gained their livelihood from its tidal flats. For over one hundred years, immigrants arrived here from all over the world. Eighty years ago, it was Vancouver's major cultural, entertainment, and shopping centre. Then in the 1930s, wages were cut and jobs were lost. In hard times, desperation and self-reliance became manifest in prostitution, gambling, bootlegging, and drug dealing: the area became known as "Vancouver's square mile of vice." After World War II, big old vaudeville theatres were torn down, streetcar tracks and the rail line were ripped up, thousands of commuters and shoppers disappeared from the area, and residents were denied home improvement permits. By the 1950s, the area was cited as an example of urban blight.



Photo : Ken Tabata



Photo : Ken Tabata

But Downtown Eastside residents have always come out swinging when their community has been threatened. They marched for jobs and housing during the 1930s. In the 1960s, they battled attempts to wipe out half their neighbourhood with an eight-lane freeway project and housing projects—and won! (But not before losing Vancouver's only residential black community.) By the 1970s, they won official recognition as a residential community and changed their name from Skid Road to the Downtown Eastside.

Today's Downtown Eastside is a tightly packed mixed income community of families and singles, industry, and social services. One quarter of its residents are of Asian ancestry and seventy percent of Vancouver's Aboriginal population resides there. Distinctive, fluidly shifting mini-communities overlap: Victory Square, Gastown, Chinatown, Main and Hastings corridors, Japantown, Oppenheimer, and Strathcona. Full of heritage and character buildings, each street is like a different neighbourhood, filled with people from different walks of life and circumstances. Schools, parks, stores, libraries, theatres, community and cultural centres, museums and gardens, cultural and sporting events—all exist within easy walking distance. Yet the neighbourhood continues to face not only the harm caused by poverty and larger social problems, but the stigmatizing of individuals and a whole community.

Treated as a dumping ground for the city's problems, the Downtown Eastside suffers from a highly publicized open-air drug market aggravated by sensationalized publicity and Vancouver's need for more recovery and mental health services. Home to only three percent of Vancouver's total population, seventy-three percent of Vancouver's low-income population live in the Downtown Eastside. Homelessness increases and the gap widens between rich and poor. Single-room occupancy hotels are being demolished to build high-end condominium developments. Although still a safe and friendly community—most of whose residents don't participate in the drug markets—the area continues to be traumatized by poverty and violence against women, as demonstrated by the on-going trial of the Port Coquitlam man accused of the murders of twenty-six Downtown Eastside women.

And now, in 2007, its health and vitality still under threat, the Downtown Eastside continues to fight. For dignity. Affordable housing. Local jobs. Help for drug users and marginalized residents. A family-friendly, commercially successful environment of small businesses. Safe, inviting public events where people can socialize and enjoy creative activities as participants and viewers. And why do they fight for these things year after year? Because they love the human scale of their "village within a city"—a place that thrives on and respects diversity.

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The media, while often referring to the Downtown Eastside as Canada's poorest postal code, typically neglects the quantity, quality, and beauty of the Eastside's extraordinary cultural heritage, its social vitality and artistic activity, its personalities and heroes. Yet according to recent Statistics Canada reports on arts and cultural activities, the Downtown Eastside ranks as the third most important postal code in Canada.

Today's Downtown Eastside is mobilizing itself in community-led renewal with goals to replace stigmatizing labels, to preserve its diversity, to support its creative community and residents, to give voice to its needs, values, and issues, to celebrate its history and heroes—in short, to stand up for the kind of community it envisions. To these ends, the community is moving forward on a host of cultural, economic, and educational schemes.

Six years ago, a Downtown Eastside Community Arts Initiative emerged with the dream to encourage arts-based cultural development, create unique partnerships between arts and cultural organizations, and build—as a lasting legacy—a community arts trust fund for artistic and social activity. A succession of exciting projects followed: the Carnegie Community Centre's centennial anniversary celebrations (2003) and the Downtown Eastside Community Play (2003) (see Walling). These events were followed by the founding of the Community Arts Network (2005) and *Fearless*, a seasonal arts and news magazine (2006). And emerging new initiatives include a Carnegie Community Opera and a Women's Memorial Garden Project.

These projects share common goals, beautifully articulated in the purpose of the





Photo : Ken Tabata



Downtown Eastside Community Arts Network: “[T]o contribute through the arts to the social, cultural and economic renewal of the Downtown Eastside as a healthy, artistically vibrant and culturally rich community where people from predominantly low incomes and from diverse lifestyles, abilities and financial means feel at home.” All the projects are striving to replace the one-dimensional, negative portrayal of life in the Downtown Eastside with an identity that reflects the challenges, realities, cultural wealth, and unique creative qualities of our home.

The success in 2003 of the Carnegie Community Centre centennial celebrations and its partnership with Vancouver Moving Theatre’s co-production of *In the Heart of a City: The Downtown Eastside Community Play* spurred the Carnegie Community Centre, in partnership with Vancouver Moving Theatre, to sponsor the first Heart of the City Festival. From 2004 to 2006, the festival co-producers have worked in partnership with a host of local artists, organizations, and individuals from a cross-section of Downtown Eastside neighbourhoods and cultures to co-produce three Heart of the City Festivals.

Their dream is to create a sustainable festival characterized by a sense of ownership and pride within the community: an inclusive festival that challenges people to give of their very best; a festival held in high regard for the standard of its work, both from artistic and community development perspectives; and a festival whose organization and content reflect the essence of the Downtown Eastside—its history, peoples, and cultures.

The challenge is that Downtown Eastside inner-city problems are aggravated by external and internal dissent over solutions. Although residents treasure their diversity and heritage, the divided community has groups that don’t readily interact due to mistrust, fear, and indifference that stem from language, cultural, and socio-economic barriers. Even local artists tend to subdivide along cultural, ethnic, economic, or disciplinary lines. The kinds of challenges and responsibilities we face in community engagement are beautifully described by William Cleveland. Our experiences confirm Cleveland’s research findings that certain elements are critical to success:

- strong, visionary, long-term leadership that can share power;
- advisories or boards reflective of the community to keep the work honest, relevant, and on-track;

- a non-adversarial community-response approach that works with existing social systems;
- patient, respectful engagement with the many layers of a community’s landscape;
- involvement of multiple generations;
- space for programming relevant to the community’s stories, issues, and cultures;
- partnerships initiated from within the community;
- a clearly articulated mission that translates to the long term self-interest of multiple partners;
- and cycles of learning and artistic practice in which work is rigorous, regular, and sustained to acquire increasing levels of expertise.

The Heart of the City Festival celebrates and builds on the people, cultures, art forms, and history of the Downtown Eastside. Involving the entire ecology of Downtown Eastside-based arts practice (professional, community, emerging, student artists, and lovers of the arts), the festival cultivates relationships within the community as well as between city-wide and Downtown Eastside artists and organizations. The festival provides skill-building workshops and capacity-sharing opportunities, giving voice to local issues, stories, and cultures. Most of the events are free or pay-as-you-can, with special low rates or free tickets for events with a set fee.

The festival’s organizational structure is carefully constructed to build in opportunities for community input and participation as well as efficiency of operation and decision making. A founding organizing committee—people from key local organizations—made sure the festival’s mandate was inclusive and diverse. Guided by the festival’s mission and purposes, Vancouver Moving Theatre oversees development and programming of the festival and its production. Programming choices are developed via collaborative consensus with community partners. A festival advisory and community meetings provide additional input and guidance. Carnegie has assisted with networking, communications, and community and corporate liaising. They contribute creative ideas to the process; provide in-kind venues, resources and staff support; and contribute events to the festival program. Community partners, including The Association of United Ukrainian Canadians and the Community Arts Network, provide advisory, in-kind, monetary, and/or programming support.

A small staff of eight or so people managed the first three festivals—with a great deal of help from the community—including 14-plus associate

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programmers, 32 arts groups, and 40 community partners. Past community partners have included educational and library associations, cultural and community centres, art galleries and local businesses, parks and gardens, churches and service organizations, historians and media, local festivals and arts networking organizations, and theatre, dance, and music groups.

The festival's diverse programming ranges from contemporary artistic forms of ancient disciplines and genres (shadow plays, operas, trapeze) to culturally representative programming featuring artists of Aboriginal, Anglo, Asian, Black, and Hispanic ancestry; from original creation to folk and classical forms; from polished presentations to staged readings with live music and new work in development; from live concerts and media presentations to visual exhibits; from strolling musicians to community celebrations; from art talks and book launches to history walks; from professional artists to emerging and community artists and lovers of the arts. We do our best to match strong art with the power of authenticity and commitment; to match artists with the appropriate audience, performance length, presentational values, and promotional profile; to present an authentic representation of the Downtown Eastside's diversity of artistic practice; and to provide professional development for our artists. We aim to showcase our community's talent to each other and the larger Vancouver community, offering them a venue where they can freely express their hopes, values, and visions

Last year's 2006 Heart of the City Festival featured visual arts and media events; music, theatre and spoken word events; multi- and interdisciplinary events; community celebrations and dances; artistic exchanges; art/history walks and talks; open houses and cultural sharing; workshops and forums. It involved 671 professional, emerging, and student artists; 32 arts organizations; 291 volunteers; 95 events; 33 art making, skill-building, and information sharing workshops; 28 locations throughout the Downtown Eastside; live audience attendance of 7678; a media audience of 100,000-plus; 40 community partners; 21 sponsors; and 2 benefactors. The festival's scale and success is due to our community partners' support, the staff's dedication and experience, the community's creativity and the festival's operational efficiency.

Organizing requires enormous amounts of staff time, resources, and expertise. It takes a two-year learning curve for staff and volunteers to become familiar with the community and organization's culture; to learn the community

engagement skills; and to establish the relationships to do the job well. Cross-sector partnerships exponentially increase the diversity, complexity, and scale of the work. Community work is often cumbersome, messy, and slow. Burn-out and high employee turn-over are hazards; self-sacrifice and overwork achieve miracles in the short-run but are not sustainable. These projects are expensive—they involve lots of people and time. The Heart of the City Festival provides—in addition to guaranteed fees for professional artists—guaranteed honorariums for hundreds of community performers.

Like others who practice community-engaged art, we're involved in a dance in which the community speaks and guides and the arts organization listens and leads. We're walking in the footsteps of an international movement of arts-based community programs based on partnerships between artists and non-arts service providers that strive to have sustained and profound impact on advancement of human dignity, health, and productivity of communities. As Cleveland reminds us, it's about art that's made with, for, and about the community it serves; art-making that's integrated with community interests, assets, and cultural traditions; art events that celebrate, commemorate, educate, and heal. In these kinds of programs, participants and constituents have a big say in determining goals, content, and context. The strength of the programs reside in their partnerships with community and service organizations, artists, and residents.<sup>1</sup>

The dance of community-engaged art involves many inter-locking layers of accountability—to the legacies of art forms, cultural traditions, and artists as creators, as well as to the festival's mission, partners, participating artists, management, and community members. We've learned—as David Hilliard of the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation has said—that progressive social change is a process, not an event or a conclusion. We're working to support the process.

*Brick by brick, step by step, show by show—  
we're building an arts community in the DTES*

**Patrick Foley,**  
DTES-involved resident and  
emerging playwright.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We've been inspired by wonderful artists, including William Cleveland (director of Seattle's Centre for the Study of Art and Community); Ann Jellicoe (who discovered the British community play concept); David Chantler (director of Calgary's Trickster Theatre with Canada's largest scale young people's residency program); Canadian community-engaged art practitioners (including Dale Hamilton, Ruth Howard, Dr. Edward Little, Rachel Van Fossen, Cathy Stubington); and Vancouver Parks Board arts programmers Jill P. Weaving and Susan Gordon. See [www.comunityengagedtheatre.ca](http://www.comunityengagedtheatre.ca)

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## BIO

**Savannah Walling** IS ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF VANCOUVER MOVING THEATRE, A PROFESSIONAL INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTS COMPANY SHE CO-FOUNDED TWENTY-THREE YEARS AGO WITH EXECUTIVE PRODUCER TERRY HUNTER. INSPIRED BY THEIR PACIFIC RIM DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE HOME, THE SMALL COMPANY, WHICH IS A MEMBER OF THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE COMMUNITY ARTS NETWORK, DEVELOPS PROJECTS IN COLLABORATION WITH ARTISTS FROM MANY GENRES, TECHNIQUES, AND CULTURAL TRADITIONS. AFTER TOURING INTERNATIONALLY FOR FIFTEEN YEARS, THEY NOW FOCUS ON ARTS-BASED COMMUNITY PROJECTS IN THEIR INNER CITY HOME, MOST RECENTLY *WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER: THE SHADOWS PROJECT—ADDICTION AND RECOVERY*.

## CALLING DTES INVOLVED ARTISTS AND ORGANIZATIONS!



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in upcoming Heart of the City Festivals?  
If yes please contact us at 604-254-6911

A Voice for the DTES Community  
[www.heartofthecityfestival.com](http://www.heartofthecityfestival.com)