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Culture Days kicks off a cross-Canada arts celebration

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Second version of national arts festival will feature more than 5,500 events, but organizers insist it's not about lobbying

All that was needed for this weekend's massive eruption of arts across Canada was a green light. And it's called Culture Days.

The national open-house arts festival includes everything from putting yourself into famous movies (by way of green-screen technology) at Toronto's Bell Lightbox to live-band karaoke at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. From improv workshops in Vancouver, even to caribou-hair tufting, a traditional native art form, in Flin Flon, Man.

More than 5,500 public art and cultural offerings, up from around 4,400 for Culture Days' debut last year, will take place Friday to Sunday across the country. And all-night events, such as Nuit Blanche in Toronto and Winnipeg, will turn downtowns into street-level art parties.

So what exactly is this overarching Culture Days banner? "We felt that we needed to find a way of celebrating the role of the arts in society," said Antoni Cimolino, general director of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival and chair of Culture Days' national steering committee.

Open-house arts festivals like this are nothing new on a smaller scale. Quebec has had its *Journée de la culture* festival for years. But at the Canadian Arts Summit in 2005, institutional arts administrators began talking about the need for a national version.

Spearheaded largely by Cimolino and Culture Days program director David Moss, the idea took shape from the start as a decentralized, grassroots concept. Others such as Jean Giguère, former chair of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, came on board and helped take the idea closer to local organizers.

"We talked about it for a year, then we needed to make a decision, 'Could we do it?' And it just took off on us," Giguère said. "It was like people were waiting for it."

Culture Days has a small office in Montreal, where it co-ordinates the national marketing, such as administering the website (www.culturedays.ca) and event listings. It also continues Culture Days' relationship with major funders, notably Sun Life Financial, as well as national media sponsors the CBC and The Globe and Mail.

But the emphasis was to keep planning local, creating cases of unusually close co-operation among arts groups. In Winnipeg, for instance, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet has built a stage in the adjacent Manitoba Hydro building for other dance companies. Meanwhile, the Manitoba Museum has opened up some of its space to individual artists and groups

from the city's Exchange District neighbourhood.

Giguère said last year's events were a huge success. "We had to call the police at 1:00 in the morning, because there were so many kids trying to get in. Only in Winnipeg would this happen, that you have to call the police to stop kids from screaming that they want into a museum."

Culture Days events are not curated, but organized through an application process. The idea is to allow visitors access to the process of making art - something they wouldn't get by simply attending a performance or going to a gallery. In some communities such as Stratford, event planning has largely been a matter of arts groups getting together in one room, something they rarely do.

"Culture Days has almost a co-ordination and marketing function. We help [the public] know that it's going on, and we extend an invitation to artists - whether they are professional or amateur or in the educational field - to step up," Cimolino said.

Quebec's *Journée de la culture* was the main inspiration. "That model was terrific because it enabled people to discover new art forms and to try experience the making of art and what the artist feels," Cimolino said. The two umbrella arts organizations share a Montreal office.

"So it became very personal. It wasn't just about getting a reduced-price ticket to a museum or going to see a play. There are national celebrations of the arts in other countries where you get a free entry into a museum. The intent here [with Culture Days] is that this stuff is free, but it's stuff that you can't get at other times of the year," Cimolino said.

Given the current budgetary climate, is Culture Days also intended as a lobbying effort?

"No, and I'll say no firmly to that," Cimolino argued, "because I think what this is about is enabling Canadians from coast to coast to coast to experience something. So there's no preaching going on here. There are not political messages being passed."

Giguère agrees that the intent isn't advocacy. Nevertheless, the fact that 35,000 Manitobans attended Culture Days events last year (nationally the figure is at least 10 times that, Giguère said) helps when she talks about arts funding with the Manitoba government. The number of events in Manitoba alone will have increased by 30 per cent this year over last.

Yet she described Culture Days as having much more of a pure intention. As did Cimolino: "This effort is there to not just open the door, but to welcome people in and to show them things and share things that they couldn't experience under other circumstances."

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