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## *Slipping on the Verge: The Performing Arts in Canada*

In the days when I worked at the United Nations, making radio and television programs and mucking about on the fringes of theatre and the other performing arts, we used to have to sign a paper that made us Citizens of the World – and I have never quite lost that habit of mind. In the last three years, as chairman of the Canada Council, I've had a wonderful opportunity to indulge the habit, by travelling to other countries to consult with them on cultural affairs, especially cultural exchange.

One thing I have learned from these travels is to mistrust easy assumptions, my own included, about art and society – and about the relationship between them. As the great filmmaker John Grierson said: "First comes the need, then the art, then the theory."

It is precisely the *need* that varies in each society, and thus the art through which it meets that need. In his book *The Structure of Art*, the American art historian Jack Burnham makes this crucial point:

*As a rule historians [of art] try to develop analytical tools covering the broadest array of art styles; but as innovation further fragments the art impulse, and new and contradictory styles of art arise, historians are forced to adopt a variety of approaches. Not too many critics or scholars seem to be worried by this situation, although they should be. It indicates that all their efforts are directed toward explaining the physical evidence of the art impulse, rather than the conceptual conditions which make art objects possible under vastly different circumstances.*

How difficult it is, then – for all of us – to study the arts as they occur in societies about which the individual observer has only a limited knowledge. And we are dealing not only with cultures, but also with *sub*-cultures and *counter*-cultures – for which the observer's conceptual grid may be the very thing *impeding* comprehension. This may be especially true in cases – like that of the

United States and Canada – where the observer is close to his subject and is beguiled by some obvious similarities to overlooking significant differences. Another American art historian, Sheldon Nodelman, pinpoints the consequences:

*Not only is the whole matrix of assumptions, values and usages – in which the society under study or its art is rooted – initially unknown to the outside observer, but . . . his spontaneous interpretations are founded, consciously or unconsciously, on patterns of behaviour and attitude proper to his own culture and must almost always be wrong. The reality of the [art] object consists in the full texture of all its relationships with its environment.*

These warnings need not deter us from trying to study and understand each other's arts. But they do suggest we should look carefully at some of our own preconceptions. All of us need a house; but it should be obvious that we have different notions of the kind of house we need for a home. And in this respect, the Canadian experience is necessarily different from that of the United States, close and fond neighbours as we are.

### **The Canadian Perspective**

To begin with, Canada is bigger than the United States. If that comes as a surprise, let me hasten to confess that its population is only one-tenth of that of the U.S.A. – and most of our 25 million people are strung out along that famous 5,000-mile undefended border that we share with you. Then we must note that the lines of communication on the continent, with the partial exception of the Great Lakes, run north and south. People in our Atlantic provinces are closer to what they still call "the Boston States"