

# ARTISTS UNDER FIRE

Maritime artists are pulling together and crying foul over recent cuts to key federal cultural support agencies...

BY RICK JANSON

**S**USAN MITTON'S VOICE TREMBLED. "THE LAST two months at the CBC have been just horrible. It's been very tough on all of us — not just job related — but everything we have worked for has been kicked out from under our feet."

The more than a 1000 people packed into the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium understood exactly what Mitton was talking about. All of them had stories to tell about the hardships that faced them in their struggles to keep their artistic endeavors alive.

Artists, writers, dancers, film-makers, musicians, craftspeople, actors...they were all united in this hall Jan. 27 in the face of massive funding cuts passed on to them by the federal government. Brought together by crisis, it none-the-less felt good to be among so many people entwined together by one common cultural thread.

At stake are the cuts in funding to the various federal cultural agencies that provide the financial spark for the arts in Canada.

Despite assurances during last summer's election campaign that the funding for federal arts agencies and councils would be maintained in line with inflation, inordinate cuts were quickly imposed on many key agencies only a few short months after election day. Over and over artists took the stage and expressed their sense of betrayal by the government.

While cuts to most sectors of the federal budget averaged three per cent, the arts were clobbered by twice that — or a six per cent cut in overall funding. To add insult to injury, the government has promised a second round of cuts yet to come this spring.

For this reason, artists from all over the Maritimes assembled here to make sure round two doesn't happen. Amid a tangle of television equipment and audio visual apparatus, they made their case one by one — captured on video tape to be later presented to communications minister Marcel Masse, who declined an invitation to be present. Instead local MP Stewart

McInnis sat uncomfortably through the four and a half hour presentation by those who's lives his government had so adversely affected.

The largest of the cuts have fallen on the CBC. \$85 million has been cut out of their national budget this year, representing 9.5 per cent of their federal subsidy.

**"Federal cultural policy consists of taking the money formerly spent to support the cultural industries and giving it to a multi-national corporate giant with a new kind of anti-aircraft gun for sale."**

--Harold Horwood, author

**"We are here today to say our institutions are our strength, our principles represent our freedom, our best defence as a country is a society of the living, not of the dead. And our values can't be sold."**

--David Craig, Eye Level Gallery

**"I think there is an area of responsibility where the government can come forward and accept its responsibilities and make a greater investment in culture, in the artists of this country, in more cultural exchanges with other countries — instead of exchanging words of war and investing in bombs."**

--Peter Power, president, Atlantic Federation of Musicians

Nationally 750 have lost their jobs as a result. In the Maritimes 61 have received their pink slips. Out of 13 local television programs produced by CBC-Maritimes, only four are deemed "safe." *Heritage, Inquiry, Portraits of the Maritimes, Country East, Feeling Good, Reach for the Top, Cape Breton Report*, dramas and

music specials are all on the chopping block. Of the four "safe" shows, two of them are CBC-New programming.

"The reality is, regional programming has been hit hardest despite upper management claims that they would protect programming at all costs," says Mitton, a spokesperson for the CBC employees committee of concern. "We are further concerned that the disproportionate share of the cuts are being born by the regions and this will result in a public broadcasting system in Canada with no community roots. Without community roots the CBC will very soon lose a great deal of its contact with the everyday life of this country, and with the Maritimes in particular."

For the CBC, the recent cuts already represent "round two." In 1978 the Liberal government cut \$71 million from the CBC's budget.

These cuts not only affect CBC's 12,000 employees from coast to coast, but also affect Canadian artists employed by the national broadcasting corporation. Last year alone the CBC wrote out 40,000 cheques to freelance artists.

"A major part of my income came from the CBC," said author Marjory Whitelaw. "Unfortunately in this region many of us are finding that it is no longer possible to earn even half of one's income from the CBC."

For many people like Whitelaw, that income will continue to diminish as these cuts are implemented.

"I'd like to say some of the best years of my life have been spent travelling around the Maritime provinces collecting material for oral history to be used in major radio documentaries. Now there is no money for this work," she said. "Those grants are so important for the knowledge and understanding of the entire country."

"Many of us in this room are in a similar situation. Our working lives are inextricably linked with the survival of the cultural agencies — the CBC, the film board, the Canada Council, the national museums — and us indeed for their own survival, for where would they be without us? We all need each other and that goes for the whole country."

Severe cutbacks in regional programming indeed affect the ability of Canada's diverse cultures to communicate with each other. In the case of Cape Breton's gaelic community, the CBC is a crucial link to the survival of a language that is at the heart of their culture.

Hector MacNeil, a "gaelic enthusiast," spoke up in defence of *Island Echoes*, a Saturday night program of gaelic heritage broadcast on CBC-radio — and in danger of disappearing from the schedule.

"We are not interested in negotiating for less airtime on the CBC, nor for a watered down version of *Island Echoes*. We in the gaelic community must have more help in developing our language and our culture — not less help," he said. "The *Island Echoes* program allows us to hear our language, our history, our music and our songs, in the medium that plays an increasingly important role in our lives."

But Hector MacNeil may be lucky if even the local CBC station survives the onslaught of continual underfunding.

CBC president Pierre Juneau told an audience in Winnipeg recently, that the CBC has reached a point where, if forced to cut any more expenditures, "we would be cutting programs drastically. Or we could cut out stations. It would be a terrific deterioration of the CBC."

Although the CBC provides a market for the work of many in the arts community, it is the Canada Council that provides the grants that make up basic sustenance funding for many organizations.

It too has suffered a cut in funds. \$3.5 million has been cut from the council, or about five per cent of their funding. And this despite recommendations by the recent Applebaum-Hebert report on federal cultural policy that the Canada Council should receive a substantial increase in its

appropriations to permit new programs and to sustain current ones.

Inadequate funding over the years has reduced the Canada Council to the point where it can no longer invest in new artists and artistic companies.

For many who have worked so hard to gain recognition, it is a bitter pill to swallow.

Take Nova Dance Theatre, for example.

"This August it will be seven years since I moved to Halifax with the express intention of creating a professional modern performing dance company which would rank among Canada's best," says NDT's Jeannie Robinson.

"I and many others have made sacrifices, worked 20 hour days, and now on the verge of success we are informed that the rules have been changed."

**"Scotia Chamber Players has an operating budget of close to \$150,000. More than two-thirds of that — \$100,000 — is paid in artists fees and salaries — more than three-quarters stays in Canada. Income tax on those salaries amounts to \$14,000 which is returned to the federal treasury — an amount that is fully \$6,000 in excess of the Canada Council's grant. You may well ask, who is subsidizing who?"**

For whatever artists in Canada are, we are not rip-off artists. We pay our way. The worth of what we produce in the way of music, dance, theatre, poetry, novels and plays and high craftsmanship is far in excess of what the public purse could ever pay for. It is not decent that we should be required to take the heat for a worldwide economic recession caused as much as anything by the pathetically single-minded devotion to the profit motive."

--Steven Pederson  
Musician and journalist

**"We think there should be an alternative to Mr. T."**

--Cathy Quinn  
Centre for Art Tapes

One of the catch-22's of getting council backing for a dance company is that "you cannot get funding until you have proven that you are good enough, stable enough, and above all determined enough to survive without it."

Robinson said they did that by creating a series of "temporary miracles," and were recently informed by the Council they had finally been deemed "to have reached the national standard of excellence." They would hereby be eligible for serious consideration for the funding they needed to survive.

"This was good news not only for me and my dancers and administrative staff," she said, "but to those literally hundreds of professionals to whom NDT has given money and employment to over the last four years, from the independent choreographers to the printer who makes up our programme."

But after seven years of hard work and much recognition, it was not to be. Robinson was told that funds have been cut back so badly that there was a negligible chance of any new dance companies being added to the Council's roles.

"It has been a long hard journey and now there is no room at the inn. I have created and juggled as many local miracles as I can. And I fear that NDT will not reopen its doors next September. I cannot blame the council. The break in the chain of promises came not there but at a higher level. Specifically at the present government's campaign promise that it would, if elected, maintain council funding with an adjustment for inflation."

Instead the government has mandated the first actual cut in Council funding in 27 years, according to Robinson.