

Diversity and Toronto: The Transformative Role of The Community Folk Art Council of Toronto

Toronto, Canada's largest city also has the distinction of being the world's most ethnically diverse city.¹ On any night of the week, somewhere in a church basement, community centre or- for some lucky ethnic groups- their own cultural centre, a dance rehearsal is taking place. The instructor is usually speaking a language that is not English and teaching dance that is not contemporary. The dances are very old and would be familiar to residents of a Portuguese village or a Philippine town. The instructor is paid an honorarium from funds collected by parents who are anxious for their children to learn social skills particular to their community. The Parents often accompany their children to these rehearsals- a form of social networking. When the rehearsals are finished, the dancers will chat among themselves –often in English- and then return home on time to be fresh for school the next morning, where they will learn the Ontario curriculum.

Since 1964, the Community Folk Art Council of Toronto has worked to bring these dance ensembles out of church basements and community centres so that they can be presented to a wider audience. At festivals like the annual CHIN picnic, civic celebrations like Canada Day or animating public spaces like Yonge Dundas Square, the member groups of the Community Folk Art Council can be found. Some select groups, always accompanied by musicians, perform during the summer months at international folkloric festivals located around the world and administered by the *Conseil international des organisations des festivals folkloriques* (CIOFF), a UNESCO-affiliated umbrella organisation. The folkloric groups are largely self-funded and the Community Folk Art Council subsists on a meagre combination of membership fees, event administration fees, Toronto Arts Council Community grants and a city of Toronto project grant. The penury of the Community Folk Art Council dates from the amalgamation of the City of Toronto in 1998, when it was no longer able to access funding from both the Cultural Office of Metro Toronto and the Toronto Arts Council. The story of the Community Folk Art Council goes back much further in Canadian cultural history.

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the history of Canadian dance, but let it be understood that from the beginnings of tradition in this country, Canadians have danced. 'Folk dance' or more properly 'ethnic dance'² is an essential part of this narrative.

In 1964, as preparation for the celebration of the centennial of the adoption of the BNA act in 1967, the Canadian Folk Art Council was created with funds from the Centennial Commission. During Centennial Year, the Canadian Folk Art Council organized hundreds of folkloric dance festivals across the country and many of these groups also performed at Expo 67 in Montréal. As a result of this frenzy of cultural activity and funding, folk arts councils started up across the country at both the provincial and municipal levels. In Toronto, the Community Folk Art Council was founded by a group of the city's ethnic leaders including Aleida Limbertie of the Dutch Community, Leon Kossar, of Ukrainian heritage who was also a well known 'ethnic commentator' writing for John Bassett's Toronto Telegram, John Novak, of Slovak origin and Father Miszielski of the Polish community. Folk Art Council members first came together to show off their dance in 1965 during a Canada Day Celebration at Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square. Groups also came together at Christmas and Easter time to demonstrate their diverse traditions to a curious audience of distinctly WASP Torontonians of the 1960's that had no idea what was going on in the homes of the city's ethnic minorities.

Once the Centennial funds dried up, it became necessary to find other sources of money and Leon Kossar who, by this time, had created the Canadian Folk Art Council together with Guy Landry of Montréal, paid a visit to the annual *Holiday Folk Fair* in Milwaukee, where Kossar was much struck by the concept of bringing various ethnic communities together to celebrate their diversity through food, dance and music. He brought the idea in a somewhat different format back to Toronto where it became *Metro International Caravan*, for many years a much-loved –and lucrative- feature of the Toronto summer. Winnipeg's *Folklorama* copied the concept the next year and is now into its 40th year of successful programming. There are still *Caravan*-like festivals throughout the country and in Ontario we have *Carassauga* and *Carabram*, as well as Windsor's *Carrousel of the Nations*. Toronto's *Caravan* died along with Leon Kossar in 2003, but the Community Folk Art Council of Toronto continues to struggle in the current harsh climate of Canadian arts.

The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism published its final report in 1969. Volume IV of the report contained recommendations on 'what steps should be taken to develop the Canadian confederation on the basis of equal partnership between the two founding races, taking into account the contribution made by other ethnic groups'.³ In reaction to these recommendations, on October 8, 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau stood up in the House of Commons to announce the creation of the world's first policy of multiculturalism... He stated his belief that 'cultural pluralism is the very essence of Canadian identity and that every ethnic group has the right to preserve and develop its own cultural values within the Canadian context'.⁴ In order to implement this policy, six programs were planned: multicultural grants; a cultural development program; funds for the writing of ethnic histories by ethnic groups; funds to support Canadian ethnic studies; additional funds for teaching Canada's official languages; programs by the federal cultural agencies including the National Film Board and the National Museum of Man (now the Museum of Civilization) to allow reflection of Canadian pluralism.⁵ Coming almost exactly one year after the October Crisis, this announcement was met with deep suspicion by Premier Robert Bourassa of Québec.⁶ Today, multiculturalism is still problematic in *la belle province*.⁷ Trudeau embraced multiculturalism as an antidote to his *bête noire* of nationalism. He was no doubt further supported in his thinking by his close friend and Secretary of State Gérard Pelletier, who headed the Canadian delegation to the 1970 UNESCO conference in Venice that called for the 'democratization of culture'.⁸

In her magisterial study of Canadian immigration policy, Freda Hawkins points out that 'multiculturalism is a highly political phenomenon, involving the development of a special relationship between government and ethnic communities'.⁹ She goes on to suggest that multicultural policy is difficult to implement in constructive and practical ways since the potential field for action is so extensive and the rhetoric often implies far larger policies and programs than are financially or administratively feasible.¹⁰ Because it has taken the form of a 'broad, government-supported and financed interest group or coalition of ethnic communities, it is often seen as an instrument of political control by the party in power'.¹¹ Furthermore, multiculturalism gives rise to several critical questions, including whether it in effect 'strengthens separateness among ethnic communities and ... whether cultural heritage is being emphasized now at the expense of Canadian (...) identity and of commitment to (Canadian) society as a whole'.¹² Hawkins correctly points out that because the primary motive for most immigrants to Canada is to attain a higher standard of living, rather than to lead the same kind of life in a foreign country, most look forward to becoming Canadian and may be confused by the concept of multiculturalism¹³. She notes, however, that ethnic communities can often provide a safe haven for new immigrants so that settlement agencies and services within these communities are needed.¹⁴ This is exactly what happened to many folk arts councils across Canada and most now offer settlement services to new Canadians and can no longer afford to support cultural activities through lack of staff and expertise.¹⁵

During the halcyon days of multiculturalism under the leadership of Pierre Trudeau, a Canadian Consultative Council on Multiculturalism was created, along with a dedicated cabinet position (first held by Dr. Stanley Haidasz, a Toronto MP). Funds were made available for many ethno-cultural programs, including the teaching of 'heritage languages' in Canadian schools. A successful book-publishing program was producing histories of various Canadian ethno-cultural groups and university chairs in ethno-cultural studies, including Acadian, German and Ukrainian were being endowed across the country. In the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the principle of multiculturalism was entrenched in sections 15(1) and 27.¹⁶ The Community Folk Art Council coasted on this wave of monetarized multiculturalism well into the late 1990's and organized many Canada Day festivals on Nathan Phillips Square as well as its annual Christmas and Easter around the World Festivals at City Hall. It also became a member of Folklore Canada International, the Canadian representative of CIOFF and took on the responsibility of sending member groups to folk festivals around the world.

On the international cultural scene, there were almost parallel developments to the innovative multiculturalism in Canada. The Venice conference noted above led to UNESCO's proclamation of the 'Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage' in 1972 and several states mentioned the importance of safeguarding what would later be called 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' (ICH).

In 1982 while Canada was repatriating its Constitution and enshrining the Charter of Canadian Rights and Freedoms, UNESCO set up a 'Committee of Experts on the safeguarding of folklore' and included Intangible Cultural Heritage in its new definition of culture and cultural heritage. In 1988, UNESCO announced the World Decade of Cultural Development at its Paris conference and issued a 'declaration safeguarding traditional culture and folklore'. In March of the same year, the Canadian Conference of the Arts organized the first—and to date, only—National Folk Arts Conference in Winnipeg under the chairmanship of Mayor Moore with the mandate to review developments in the folk arts in Canada; to examine the current issues in this community; to discuss directions for the future and to identify opportunities for the Canadian government to assist in this development. The bringing together of hundreds of carefully selected artists and administrators in Winnipeg gave new impulse to practitioners who responded to Secretary of State and Minister for Multiculturalism Minister David Crombie's call for partnerships to better understand the importance of community and popular arts'. Recommendations included the development of a national 'databank' for the folk arts, the further defining of government roles in the folk arts at all three levels; government help in raising the public profile and awareness of the folk arts; the establishment of a federal ministry of culture; marketing training for practitioners; facilitating the eligibility of folk art for federal cultural grant programs (e.g. Canada Council); more resources; education to facilitate the transmission of culture; developing a national training program focussing on excellence; and encouraging 'mainstream' cultural agencies to be more inclusive of the folk arts.¹⁷

Interestingly, one of the participants, Andrey Tarasiuk has gone on to be director of new play development at the Stratford Festival, but most other participants are still working at their respective festivals or schools of dance today, or have passed away, including Leon Kossar and Aleida Limbertie. Canada Council still has no folk art program and, although schools across the country, including the National Ballet School, offer courses in folkloric dance, there is no national folkloric training program.

Ten years later, in 1998, the Minister for Canadian Heritage Sheila Copps announced the creation of a Coalition for Cultural Diversity, formed jointly with France to combat the forces of

globalization, affirming that ‘cultural diversity is a fundamental human right and countries should ensure its preservation and promotion, as well as taking care that ‘cultural policy is not subject to the constraints of international trade agreements.’¹⁸ Canada was also the first country to ratify the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression. During the same year of 1999, the Smithsonian Institute organized a conference with UNESCO designed to assess the ‘Declaration Safeguarding Traditional Culture and Folklore’, with a view to informing American cultural policy makers about UNESCO’s interests in what would become known as Intangible Cultural Heritage.

With the new millennium, UNESCO member states adopted the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, along with an action plan. A list of 19 masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage masterpieces was proclaimed. In 2003, the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage was adopted and ratified by 102 states. Canada has not ratified this convention. It is a difficult to understand how the Government of Canada can be in favour of cultural diversity yet not support intangible cultural heritage, and many researchers are still working on finding answers to this question. However, Newfoundland and Labrador are working towards the adoption of an official strategy for ICH and have recently appointed a provincial folklorist. Québec is also drafting an ICH policy and Nova Scotia is following suit, after establishing an ICH chair at Cape Breton University, The Community Folk Art Council of Toronto continues to struggle, hoping that the ICH wave will one day lift it towards more prosperous shores and that the province of Ontario will understand and come to value its own Intangible Cultural Heritage.

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¹ The United Nations is usually cited as the source for this well-known statement.

² See Joann Kealiinohomoku, 'An Anthropologist looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance' in Dils and Albright, Moving History/Dancing Cultures, A Dance History Reader, Wesleyan UP 2001

³ André Laurendeau and Davidson Dunton, Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in Canada, Vol 1V, Queen's Printer 1969,

⁴ House of Commons Debates, 8 October 1971, 8545-6

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Le Devoir, November 17, 1981

⁷ e.g. the *Immigrant Code of Conduct* developed by the Parish of Hérouxville, QC

⁸ see Joyce Zemans, Where is here? Canadian Culture in a globalized world, 10th Annual Roberts Lecture, York U., 1996

⁹ Freda Hawkins, Critical years in immigration-Canada and Australia compared, McGill-Queens UP, 1989 218

¹⁰ *ibid* 215

¹¹ *ibid* 215

¹² *ibid* 216

¹³ for an example of this, see Neil Bissoondath, Selling Illusions. The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada, Penguin 1994

¹⁴ *ibid* 217

¹⁵ C.Limbortie, Guide to Traditional Dance and Music in Ontario, unpublished report, OAC 2007

¹⁶ Enacted as Schedule B to the *Canada Act 1982* (U.K.) 1982, c. 11, which came into force on April 17, 1982

¹⁷ Proceedings, 1988 National Folk Arts Council March 4, 5 and 6, Winnipeg, CCA 1988 8-16

¹⁸ www.cdc-ccd.org