



Todd Hirsch

## Get with the dance, Alberta

**P**ity the poor arts communities in Alberta. They just can't seem to get the respect they deserve. While the corporate community has for the most part been a great supporter of the arts, many small "c" conservative ideologues in the province have treated the arts as trivial, a waste of money, and unnecessary.

An overbearing sense of thrift and practicality dominates public attitudes towards the arts. Many individual Albertans have a profound appreciation of the arts, but somehow this has not translated into much support for publicly funding it. Per capita spending on the arts by the Alberta government is among the lowest in the country, and this in a debt-free province awash in surplus cash.

As Alberta's artists point out, the arts is an economic sector in its own right. They create a product, there is a market for their product, and thousands of people are employed and earn wages in that market. Isn't that reason enough to publicly fund the arts?

Well, no, it isn't.

The cynic points out that, while they may indeed employ lots of people, the arts are often sustained only with gobs of taxpayers' dollars. The government could create the same number of jobs by paying people to dig holes and fill them up again. Certainly government-funded activities with no purpose other than to employ people are neither helpful nor desirable.

But before we discard the arts too quickly, we should consider how they enhance economic productivity and boost output. The arts sector — everything from visual arts, performing arts, film, music, dance, and theatre, and so on — contributes to a healthy economy in two very important ways.

**F**irst of all, it creates desirable amenities that are increasingly required if Alberta intends to play in the world's

big leagues. Consider Calgary, with the second largest concentration of corporate head offices in the country. It is suffering from a shortage of professional labour, and if Calgary-based companies are to be world-class businesses, they need to be recruiting top professionals from around the world.

Calgary has a lot going for it in terms of being an appealing place to live — mountains on its doorstep, wonderful green space, a thriving volunteer mentality and a great university. These offerings on their own will attract a certain number of people, as will good job prospects.

But if Calgary is to really compete for workers internationally, those amenities alone won't cut it. The world's best, brightest, and most highly educated professionals and corporate executives will not move to Calgary for NHL hockey. They won't come for the fresh air or fly-fishing. They won't even come for the Calgary Stampede.

But suppose how much more marketable Calgary would be if it could add to this list one of the world's greatest centres for the arts, a stunning architectural masterpiece that would put the city on the world's cultural map — and give it a claim to international stardom for reasons other than cowboys and a rodeo.

A vibrant arts scene is a valuable economic marketing tool that would give Alberta's cities a level of cultural sophistication that, by and large, they lack.

The second way the arts boost economic productivity is in the way they stimulate problem-solving abilities. Thomas Friedman, in his best-selling book *The World is Flat*, devotes considerable attention to Georgia Tech. The school found that by expanding the arts and music programs on campus, their engineering and science students became better problem-solvers. Great technical skills alone are not enough. They need to be accompanied by those critical "right-brain" functions — cre-

ativity, innovation, imagination and those flashes of genius when the light comes on and the engineer says, "I've figured out how to solve this problem!"

Isn't this the essence of the free enterprise system? Solving problems, seeing new ways to do things, and dreaming up great ideas? These aren't generated by a spreadsheet or a test tube. They come out of the human mind, and if that human mind is trained only in the "left-brain" linear, systematic ways of thinking, those flashes of genius will be pretty thin.

**O**f course, the benefits of stimulating the "right-brain" are intangible in dollar terms. Unless you can prove it in a rigorous cost-benefit analysis, business leaders will be skeptical.

Forcing the arts on employees is not the approach. The trick is making sure that the arts, in a variety of forms, are thriving and available within the community. Many companies offer gym memberships to their employees in recognition of the corporate benefits of healthy workers. Why not offer one afternoon off every quarter in order to participate in some artistic event of the worker's choice? Encourage, don't force. Treat it as serious professional development, not as a day to goof off.

The private sector has realized, quite rightly, that enhanced productivity doesn't happen by chaining workers to their desks or force-feeding them more Excel courses. It happens when workers are free of stress, live balanced personal lives, and come to work each day with minds ready to find solutions and think up ideas. Fostering a vibrant arts scene in the community can play a large role in creating — and attracting — these kinds of workers.

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