

## If the walls could talk

Sarah Jennings. *Art and Politics: The History of the National Arts Centre*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2009.

Review by Anthony Wilson-Smith

For politicians, culture is the love that dares not speak its name. Since Pierre Trudeau, no prime minister in the last 30 years has enthusiastically embraced things cultural — even those who practise them in private. That’s because far more voters attend hockey games than concerts, and most people believe those two constituencies don’t mix — even though several prime ministers prove the contrary. Jean Chrétien made much of his fondness for football and hockey — and less of the fact he is a sophisticated art-lover with a similar passion for classical music. (He sometimes spent Sunday afternoons at 24 Sussex watching NFL football with the sound turned down — replaced by a concerto playing on his stereo.) Stephen Harper hurt his election hopes in Quebec in 2008 by cutting cultural spending and making dismissive remarks about its partisans. But the Prime Minister, a huge hockey fan who is writing a book on the sport, famously demonstrated his piano-playing chops at a National Arts Centre (NAC) gathering earlier this year.

The relationship between the cultural community and politicians is classically dysfunctional — the former need the latter’s support to survive, and that creates a relationship built from dependence and dominance. Sarah Jennings understands that, and correctly identifies Ottawa’s NAC as the meeting point for that troubled pairing. That’s the subject of her intensely researched, marvellously nuanced new book, in which she traces 40 years of the NAC, along with the disparate characters who have inhabited and shaped it. *Art and Politics: The History of the National Arts Centre* is an unabashed

love letter from Jennings, one of its most active supporters. It also mirrors the larger story of the role of the arts on the national political scene, including the way it has tied into everything from national unity issues to a showcase for bilingualism to a battleground for internecine political wars.

Jennings brings a front-row seat to the backstage dramas, feuds and sometimes petty bitchery of participants. That includes an impeccably balanced account of the aborted million-dollar donation by hockey star Alexei Yashin and his family, along with the near-departure of the NAC Orchestra’s brilliant director, Pinchas Zukerman. One particular hero is the handsome, wealthy and elegant Hamilton Southam, who played a crucial role in the NAC’s inception, construction and early years. These days, the NAC is a fixture on the city’s downtown skyline in its Elgin Street location, just down from Parliament Hill. So it’s startling to be reminded that the original location was to be farther from downtown. The rapid, dramatically escalating estimates of construction — from \$9 million to a final total of over \$26 million — meant that its salvation several times depended on Prime Minister Lester Pearson’s direct approval, accompanied with a sigh. Southam fought a long and near-successful battle to have the NAC known as “Les Rideaux” — a nod to his summer estate in the Rideau Lakes.

The other figure who looms large is present CEO Peter Herrndorf, who since arriving a decade ago has restored the NAC to much the same glory as in its years under Southam. Jennings does a particularly good job of recounting how the indomitable Herrndorf — living

proof that the description “charismatic bureaucrat” is not an oxymoron — has put the NAC on its most stable footing ever, even as its productions have enhanced its artistic reputation.

One frustration is that despite the book’s strength of research and detail, inaccuracies remain. The former Liberal politician André Ouellet is, for example, not “Ouellette,” as spelled here. The journalist turned communications guru John Ferguson was a senior executive with — but never “president” of — CIBC. Nor was he a dancer of the same name with whom he shares the same index notation.

Those are small quibbles. Along with the strength of detailed narrative, several points are striking. The NAC was brought into being via closed-door meets by a small group of movers-and-shakers. That would be unacceptable today. So if the NAC didn’t exist, it likely could not be invented. The will to publicly finance arts-related structures — never strong — has all but disappeared. Think here of the virtually defunct plan to build a national portrait gallery in Ottawa.

That brings to mind a quote from Chrétien that Jennings highlights on the back cover. Former heritage minister Sheila Copps says Chrétien once told her that “there are two things that are a hallmark of good government, and one of them is the arts...but people are not going to vote for you because you invested in the arts.” Which explains, as much as anything, why politics and culture will always make for strange bedfellows.

*Anthony Wilson-Smith, former editor of Maclean’s, now lives in Ottawa and was delighted by Prime Minister Harper’s performance at this year’s NAC Gala.*

