



Visionaries of our Community

Janis Barlow: Excellence in the Arts **By: Megan Pasche**

Janis Barlow has spent her whole life addicted to the arts. From grade school theatre productions right up until today, creativity and artistic expression has always been a part of who she is. Everyone in the arts community in Niagara knows Janis Barlow, but those outside of that world may not. To put it simply, Janis Barlow is an expert in the arts.

Barlow started her career working in theatre production, doing everything from acting, to stage managing, to marketing and development. Her current job, as an Arts Consultant, has been keeping her busy since 1978. An Arts Consultant "is someone who is skilled, experienced and knowledgeable in one or more disciplines of the arts, who abides by a code of conduct and applies those qualifications to serve the health, effectiveness and sustainability of the arts." Or to put it more simply, helping to "organize everyone else's thinking". Barlow is the go-to person for arts organizations needing help with strategic planning, feasibility studies, business plans and arts executive searches.

Born and raised in St. Catharines, Janis says she first "fell in love with performance at Oakridge Public School and Sir Winston Churchill Secondary School." She credits this love to the teachers she had and to her parents, who were always supportive of all her artistic endeavors. Janis' involvement with the arts grew from there, as she became involved with groups such as the Peninsula Press Theatre and Niagara Youth Theatre. Fast forward a couple of decades and now, Janis Barlow has consulted on the design, rehabilitation and management of over 200 theatres. She has worked for the government, arts and heritage groups, private foundations, and many more organizations all throughout North America.

And though Janis spends most of her time working on projects that don't directly involve Niagara, she is still involved in this area when she needs to be although, as she puts it, she "is very conscious of being a prophet without honour in my own city". But having helped out numerous local organizations including Carousel Players, Shaw Festival, Gallery Players, the Niagara Symphony and the Niagara Artists Centre, she is very much aware of the triumphs and trials of the Niagara arts community.

So being such a huge supporter of arts and culture in general, she knows how important of a role artistic expression plays in a community -- especially a small one like Niagara. When asked to

articulate why the arts are so important, Barlow pauses, and answers, "That is such a big question. I want to respond by asking, why do you think agriculture is important to a community? Why do you think economics is important to a community? Why do you think socialization is important to a community? May I just say that really good answers to those three questions come to us through the arts. I think that the creative arts and expression of ideas are fundamental to identity, self-actualization, innovation, economic progress and the preservation of democracy."

Without an infusion of arts and culture, every community would likely start to look and feel the same. It's the life force: the gas in a car, the oil in the chain, or whatever other metaphor fits appropriately. The arts allow different people to connect to each other on a different level and to find commonalities that they might not have realized they had.

While Niagara's arts community is small, it is constantly growing. This area has numerous innovative arts companies and a lot of arts galleries; while it may take a little searching to find them all, they are there, mostly centred in the downtown core.

Janis says, "Our distance from Toronto and Buffalo, our land and our history have fuelled a broad and unique range of artistic transitions. But, every region's greatest strength is always a function of the talent, the passion and the commitment of the people involved and the wisdom of their leadership." The last 10 years have seen an "explosive growth of the arts in St. Catharines and throughout the peninsula," and the quality and variety of work put out by these groups is extremely good.

With a new performing arts centre slated to be built in downtown St. Catharines sometime in the near future, the arts and culture sector can only continue to grow. But in order for the performing arts centre to function well in the community, Janis explains:

"A successful performing arts centre is not merely a building; it should be the result of a growing grassroots movement. If an accountable, collaborative, community-based and community-inspired organization is developed to oversee and manage the project and program development, then it can have an empowering and transformational impact on St. Catharines. If the building is treated as a task to be expedited by City staff then I am not sure it will be substantially more impactful than Corbloc or the Ministry of Transport building on the culture and economy of the city. It is the difference between an old fashioned community barn raising and the delivery of pre-fabricated structure assembled by out of town contractors. One process builds community; the other demoralizes it. It is all about the programming and process-the building is just a delivery mechanism. It is crucial to have that local theatre facility management coordinating development and communications form the outset."

And if there is anybody's advice that should be followed, it is Janis'. She knows the arts profession inside and out, and possibly more importantly than knowing it, she loves it. These qualities are what allow her to continue to provide arts organizations with the leadership, guidance and knowledge to help them function to their fullest potential.