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Canadian Arts Summit

**The Banff Centre
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**Speaking Notes
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Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

About six weeks ago, David Leighton and I were invited to appear before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage.

The NAC had gone through a number of difficult and sometimes "stormy" sessions with the Heritage Committee over the past two years, but this one turned out to be quite different. The parliamentarians were upbeat, complimentary... and overwhelmingly supportive.

The one interesting (and somewhat provocative) question was asked by a liberal MP, Sam Bulte -- a strong champion of the arts... and a former Chairman of the Board of the Canadian Stage Company in Toronto.

She was curious if the National Arts Centre's role in the performing arts was any different from that of the Canadian Stage Company. Weren't both organizations, Sam asked, primarily local organizations... doing a lot of co-production work with other arts organizations across the country?

It was a discussion that Sam and I had had on a number of previous occasions... so I waded into the question with some enthusiasm.

I argued that there were really three major differences between the NAC and the Canadian Stage Company -- differences that defined the NAC as a national performing arts organization:

- 1) First, the House of Commons had passed legislation thirty years ago... articulating the need for a national showcase for the performing arts in Ottawa -- a national centre that would create, showcase and celebrate excellence in the Canadian performing arts. (It was an act of national will in the late 1960's to create such a centre);

2) Secondly, the National Arts Centre belongs to the people of Canada. Canadians have been investing their hard earned tax dollars in the NAC for more than 30 years... and they have a "proprietary interest" in the NAC... and in what it does;

3) The NAC has a publicly appointed, national Board -- a group of public trustees, who have strongly advocated a national role for the NAC since Hamilton Southam's early days as Director General.

The Parliamentary Committee meeting ended on that note... but David and I were both struck by the fact that all of the political parties at the hearing complimented us for emphasizing the NAC's national role so strongly. And a number of the MP's commented on how frustrated they had been about the NAC's gradual withdrawal from its legislatively defined national role over the previous decade.

As all of you know, the 1990's were a tough time for the NAC. Senior Management turnover and turbulence, severe cuts in government funding, box office problems, and the lack of a coherent artistic vision all led the NAC to gradually retrench. The Orchestra toured less; the NAC largely stopped producing theatre... and didn't do any theatrical touring at all; and for understandable financial reasons, the NAC gradually became more of a "road house" for American commercial fare.

But as we indicated to the Parliamentary Committee six weeks ago, the news coming out of the NAC is a lot happier these days... and the organization has very much recommitted itself to playing a national role in the performing arts.

First the good news -- (a) thanks to the artistic leadership provided by Pinchas Zukerman, Marti Maraden, Jean-Claude Marcus and Michel Dozois, we're having one of our best seasons in years; (b) we're setting box office records, and we've attracted 35,000 subscribers this season; (c) we've just announced a \$2 million surplus for 1998-99 (eliminating our accumulated deficit)... and we're on track to declare another significant surplus for the current fiscal year; (d) in partnership with local orchestras across the country, we've just completed a highly successful "National Arts Centre Orchestra" Tour across Canada; (e) and, as I mentioned earlier, we've regained a lot of political support in the House of Commons.

At the same time, the NAC Board... under the dynamic leadership of David Leighton... has taken a strong position on the NAC's national role.

Let me give you a flavour of what that will mean for the NAC over the next few years:

1) It means that we'll be working closely with arts organizations across the country to make sure that the best Canadian works... and the best Canadian artists... are showcased at the NAC (Quinze jours / Whydah Falls, etc.);

2) It means that we'll be working closely with other arts organizations to make sure that new plays and new repertoire can be developed in Canadian theatre and dance;

3) It means that the NAC Orchestra... in partnership with local orchestras... will do more touring at home; and significantly more touring internationally (this fall's tour of the Middle East and Europe);

4) It means that the NAC will begin to produce more original production in English and French Theatre... and that we hope to tour some of that work in collaboration with regional theatre companies;

5) It means that the NAC will play a more significant role in professional development for the performing arts -- through mentoring and training of artists and artistic professionals in the field;

6) It means that the NAC will reach out to a national audience through greater use of radio, television and CD recordings;

7) It means that the NAC will also reach out to a national audience through for greater use of the internet (launch of the NACO season last week);

8) It means that the NAC will play a more active role in educational issues... and particularly, in arts education;

9) It means that the NAC will develop more strategic partnerships with organizations across the country where there's a natural fit -- e.g. the National Youth Orchestra; the Banff Centre; Radio-Canada and the CBC; les Grands Ballets Canadiens or the Royal Winnipeg Ballet; Opera Lyra;

10) And finally, it means that the NAC will take a more pro-active approach to generating earned revenue across the country: in touring, in sponsorship development, in planned giving, and in attracting major gifts. And we're determined to do that by "expanding the arts revenue pie"... not be taking money away from other arts organizations (University of Toronto experience/hospital experience).

It's an overall approach that's consistent with our national mandate... but it's also an approach that we believe will be beneficial to the local and regional arts organizations with whom we work and collaborate.

I look forward to fielding your comments and questions.