

Arts groups incensed by postal hikes

by JAMIE PORTMAN
Southam News

TORONTO — Performing arts groups across the country are hopping mad at the new Canada Post Corporation for imposing mail rates which they say hamper their ability to stay afloat financially.

"We view this matter with the utmost seriousness," says Betty Webster, executive director of the Association of Canadian Orchestras. ACO is one of five national arts service associations meeting this weekend in Toronto to seek new ways of breaking a current deadlock in discussions with an unsympathetic post office.

Webster believes that current postal policy makes no sense at a time when other branches of the federal government are pursuing cultural policies which force arts groups to rely less heavily on funding from Ottawa and more on their own fiscal initiatives.

She says there has been no meaningful government response to a recent protest brief submitted last November by five national performing arts service associations representing 77 professional theatres, 69 orchestras, 71 dance companies and 11 opera companies who claim a total annual mailing of more than 20 million pieces.

The brief contended that "on one hand, government is encouraging us to maximize our abilities to create revenues while on the other hand government is taking away performing arts organizations' ability to go out and help ourselves."

Non-profit arts organizations believe they are suffering particularly serious fall-out from to postal rate increases of 76.5 per cent for first-class mail, 100 per cent for third class and 44.4 per cent in bulk-mailing rates.

In their November brief, they argued that direct government support of the arts was declining because of

Ottawa's continued under-funding of the country's major cultural grants agency, the Canada Council.

"This policy has forced the arts industry to seek increased income from the private sector by raising ticket prices, intensifying marketing efforts and by creating private-sector fund-raising campaigns.

"The most successful income-producing material is the mail. Direct mail is the single most effective means for attracting new buyers to new performances and the only effective means of ensuring ongoing communications with present subscribers."

A survey of Canadian theatres shows that under the old rates, more than \$500,000 annually was spent on postage, with 35 per cent used for third-class bulk mail and 48 per cent for first-class.

Orchestras show similar figures. The Vancouver Symphony, with the largest

subscription audience in the world, has been spending \$106,000 annually to sustain this level of support. Collectively, Canada's orchestras posted 7 million pieces last season.

Webster also says the new postal rates could strangle efforts to raise vital donations support from the private sector. The National Ballet, which must raise \$1 million annually to survive, spends 55 per cent of its postal budget on bulk mailings for this purpose.

Arts groups believe the old 17-cent first-class rate

should have been retained for non-profit arts and charitable organizations and that the new bulk mailing rate—useful for circulation

of season brochures — is also unacceptable.

"What disturbs us is the inconsistency of Ottawa," says Webster. "Govern-

ment tells us we must do more to help ourselves and then institutes measures which jeopardize our ability to act."



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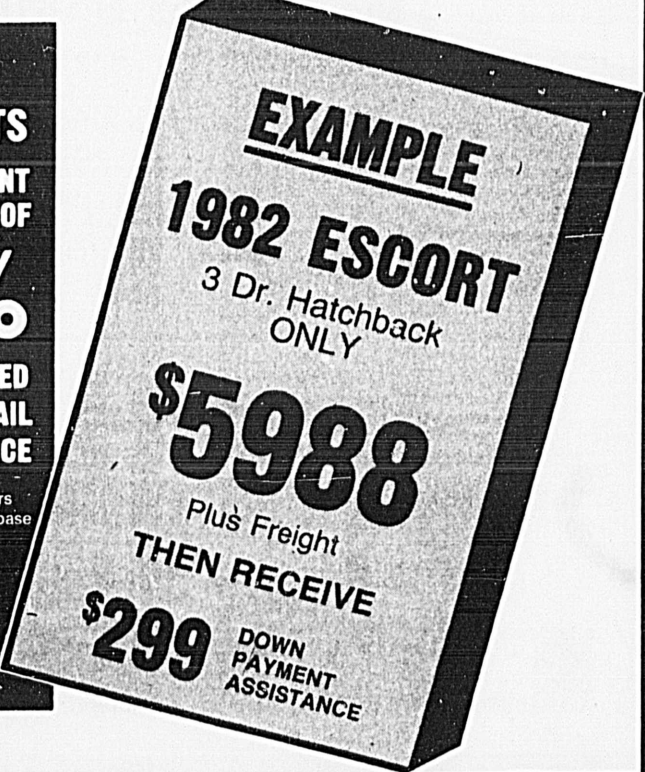
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