

TALES OF A VANCOUVER WRITER'S FESTIVAL VOLUNTEER

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IN 1994 I VOLUNTEERED at the Vancouver International Writers & Readers Festival. My motives were mixed — a desire to try different volunteer work, to contribute to a festival that was far more meaningful than the Molson Indy, and last but not least the fact that most of the members and volunteers at the Festival are women (I was recently separated). I signed up, was accepted, and began eleven years of volunteering with the Festival. Along the way I became a member, purchased tickets to events, performed and M.C.'ed at the annual volunteer party open microphone event, and eventually encouraged my employer to become a sponsor of the Festival.

My volunteer duties along the way included Front of House, Security, Concession, Bartender, Internet Cafe, Booksigning Attendant, Waiter, Audience Survey, Assistant Stage Manager, Spelling Bee Assistant, Chauffeur, Author Escort, and Quarterdeck King. The latter position was formerly titled Quarterdeck Queen, an honorific I demurred from accepting.

Writers are a generally interesting and occasionally unruly lot, their attendants often less the former and more the latter. The Festival's audiences tend to be fairly genteel, with only the occasional transgression. Somewhat to my surprise, poets turned out to be the "wild bunch". The annual Poetry Bash is not only great fun, but by engendering a gathering of poets also incurs much partying before, during, and after the Bash itself.

While working the concession stand one year during the Poetry Bash, where drinks and snacks for poets are free, two grizzled old men made their way to the front of the line and ordered coffees. They were clearly suffering (or enjoying) the effects of some serious partying, and were sporting 5 o'clock shadows from at least three or four days previously.

I presented the two coffees, and looked expectantly for their money. They seemed surprised, and I explained that coffee was \$1.00 each. They looked at each other, then at me, then at each other again. The taller one shrugged and asked the shorter one if he had any change. The shorter one shrugged and reached into his pocket, coming up with a handful of change which he held out to me for selection, much as if it was foreign currency and he didn't know how to add it up. I selected two dollars worth of coins from his hand and thanked them, pointing out where the cream and sugar was. By this time I was thinking that I was missing

something. The intermission ended, and the final poets started their readings. When George Bowering and Al Purdy went on stage, I belatedly realized who I'd made pay for the coffees. Oops. Obviously I should have known who they were. On the other hand, they hadn't felt like introducing themselves simply to get a couple of free coffees. I tried to find Al after the reading to return his money, but didn't manage to locate him. I hoped to return it at another time, but he passed away before I could do so. Al, I owe you two dollars.

The Festival takes place on Granville Island, with Performance Works being the main venue for night time events. One year, a long-running play had been booked into the venue, so the Festival had to look elsewhere. One of the new venues turned out to be the Starfish Room, usually a place for much less civilized events. Although the Writers Festival staff and volunteers were running the event, the regular house bouncers were on hand, perhaps in case our audience got out of hand. I was working Front of House, and did have to deal with some unruly Festival patrons who were hoping they could pick up rush tickets for an otherwise completely sold-out event, the Literary Cabaret.

During the event, while someone was reading a quiet section from their book, some young lads clearly "under the influence" came stumbling up the stairs looking for the party that would normally be happening at the venue. I blocked them at the top of the stairs, saying that the event was sold out. They looked like they were about to get troublesome, but one peeked past me, saw someone reading on stage, and asked what was happening. I explained that the Writers Festival had booked the club for some readings, and they instantly turned around and headed down the stairs looking for a better place to party. One of the bouncers had seen me talking to them and came over to help out, but was impressed that I had dispatched them so quickly without a fight. Obviously he had not realized the power of literature.

The Writers Festival tries many different kinds of events, and some have become traditional. The Literary Cabaret, for example, is an event that sells to capacity each year. A group of Vancouver's top jazz musicians comes together as the house band Poetic License, under the direction of Sal Ferreras. A number of writers and poets are chosen to perform with the band, in a wide variety of presentations. The music ranges from classical to polka, folk to free-form jazz, with the authors either speaking while

the band performs background music and effects, or sometimes the authors sing or play with the band. One year there were even vaudeville gymnastics.

The event stretches the bounds of literature in many ways, and also gives the authors an engaging and entertaining experience. Thomson Highway did a gig with them one year, and was pacing about extremely nervously prior to his afternoon rehearsal. He hadn't worked with a band before, so I assured him that he needn't worry, that whatever he wanted to happen would be made so almost telepathically. He was going to read from *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, and he suggested to Sal that perhaps there could be some sound effects indicating a snowstorm. Before the words were out of his mouth the keyboard player had a cold wind whistling out of the speakers. Thomson jumped around in surprise and joy, and had no more nervousness about the rehearsal or the performance, which went off flawlessly.

One year Alma Lee, the Artistic Director of the Festival, hired Justin McGrail to do performance poetry at events lineups. He entertained the waiting patrons while wearing a kilt, declaiming poetry and Shakespeare, or making up poems "on the fly" by request. An Internet Cafe was created one year, where multimedia authors presented their projects, ranging from text-based and image-based works to Internet-based projects where you could create your own story by following a variety of optional links. Another year Dr. Wade Davis presented a slide show of incredible images from his trips to the Amazon, replete with tales of the jaguar and alternate realities.

An exhibition of book-related art is on display at Performance Works every year. Last year Nick Bantock had a solo show titled *The Metaphysical World of Nick Bantock* that included new and previously published art. The previous year there was a wonderful display of paper-maché portraits of Canadian authors by Susan Longmire titled *In Their Own Words*. They were done as busts, with the surfaces made up of hundreds of strips of paper glued on, each with sentences from the author's work.

Many groups of school children attend a large series of events for younger audiences. Subsidies are made available from the Cynthia Woodward Development Fund to schools who cannot afford to send their classes to the Festival. The Festival also has a number of events every year featuring French authors, in a series titled *La Joie de Lire*, for both

school and adult audiences.

Every year, following the Festival, the staff throw a party for the volunteers by way of appreciation for their work. A major part of the occasion is the Open Mic event. Many of the volunteers are writers or aspiring writers themselves, and they are invited to read some of their work. The Open Mic is a great event, and many excellent stories, poems, and songs have been performed over the years.

One year Alma Lee invited poet bill bissett to do a reading for the volunteers. At that time the volunteer parties were held immediately after the end of the Festival, which placed them typically on or just before Hallowe'en, and often costumes were worn. bill bissett arrived at the party with a friend who was lugging a heavy cardboard box.

It turned out that the box was full of fireworks, which bill and his friend began lighting outside the festival offices where the party was being held. Roman candles began sending balls of fire all over the place, bouncing off buildings, power poles, cars, and even shooting across the road into the parking garage. Volcanoes of fire were erupting on the sidewalk, toppling over into whirling showers of fire and sparks as bill danced around lighting more and whooping in glee as the whole street turned into a pyrotechnic event of smoke and flames.

Folks in the party either came out to help light more fireworks, or simply stood safely inside looking out at the happenings. One woman standing beside a table that was lit by candles inadvertently backed up too far, and her synthetic sweater caught on fire. She was instantly helped out of it, and the fire was stomped out before she suffered any damage. The police arrived. The fireworks sputtered out. bill headed inside. Partying resumed, but Alma has never held the party at Hallowe'en again, nor has any poet been invited to read to the volunteers again.

The Festival sparked my own creativity in a number of ways, and has done the same for hundreds of volunteers, thousands of members of the audience, and for the many authors who come together to read, tell tall tales, and get to know each other. It is a valuable gathering of those interested in literacy, literature and knowledge, those who spend their lives writing for us, and those who read their work. The Festival bookstore often has books for sale that are otherwise not available, brought along by the authors themselves or their publishers.

The Festival was held this year from October 19 – 24, and is always worth a visit.