

Director follows sun in room

BY JACQUELINE LOUIE, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD SEPTEMBER 6, 2013

Presented By:



Damon Johnson, artistic director of the ProArts Society, relaxes in his sun room — his favourite room in his Calgary house. "It's a room where you can constantly look out at the world," he says (click on the photo for our 12-picture essay).

Photograph by: Gavin Young, Calgary Herald

Every Wednesday at noon, sublime music soars to the vaulted ceilings of the Cathedral Church of the Redeemer, located across the street from Olympic Plaza.

The cost to audience members? It's free. The value? Priceless.

It's all part of a noon-hour concert series presented by Calgary's ProArts Society — a non-profit organization bringing together artists and audiences in a historic venue in the heart of Calgary's downtown cultural district.

For the most part, the performers are emerging artists and professionals, whom ProArts Society artistic director Damon Johnston describes as "extraordinarily talented young artists."

The ProArts At Noon concert series is the mainstay of the ProArts Society, which produces and presents a free noon-hour concert every Wednesday, year-round (with the exception of the week between Christmas and New Year's Day, and Easter week).

Concertgoers can show up with their lunch and take in the music — "it's a casual affair," says Johnston. Performances range from opera to flamenco, jazz trios, pianists, classical singers, and much more.

Check the schedule for details at proartssociety.ca

ProArts Society, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2012, continues to seek local sponsors and corporate support to assist in its efforts.

Johnston believes that when cities nurture a vibrant arts community, young people “won’t be raised solely on a diet of pop culture and the tabloids. Local arts can be a much more meaningful experience than their Game Boy ever will.”

For Johnston, 58, the arts have been an all-important part of life since he moved to Calgary.

Born and raised in Prince Albert, Sask., he attended high school in Regina, and came to Calgary in 1976 on a whim. At university, where he took a general arts course, he fell in with the local theatre crowd — and after helping out backstage, he was hooked.

He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1981 from the University of Calgary, and became involved in the dance world, spending 16 years with Decidedly Jazz Danceworks.

He began first as general manager and then as production and tour manager.

He left DJD to become a contemporary dance producer and artistic director at Dancers’ Studio West.

“Any contemporary art form is tough slugging,” says Johnston, who loved the contemporary dance world, but eventually became disillusioned. He took a gap year, worked as a consultant, helping manage tours and writing grants, and did quite a bit of gardening as a gardening consultant. He became ProArts Society’s artistic director in 2008.

Johnston and his wife, Michele Moss, a professor of dance at the U of C, have a 17-year-old daughter named Odessa. They live in a 1918 bungalow.

Question: Which room in your home is your favourite and why?

Answer: The sunroom.

Question: What activities do you — and other family members — do in this room?

Answer: It’s a room we hang out in, and we often eat out there. It’s a room where you can constantly look out at the world. It has a glass ceiling and glass walls. You feel as though you’re outside, but you are really comfortable with a glass of wine inside. It’s particularly fabulous not only to look out on the yard, but also to look up at the trees. The neighbourhood has a canopy of big American elms. They are magnificent trees, although they throw down sticky goo onto cars.

Question: What is your favourite piece of furniture in this room?

Answer: There are two antique wicker chairs that I brought with me from Prince Albert in the late 1970s. They came from a cabin just north of Prince Albert in the Parkland District, which has a lot of beautiful First World War antiques. They are exceptionally well-built wicker furniture.

Question: What is your favourite piece of art in this room?

Answer: I collect plaster figure lamps of various figures — bullfighters, Mexican dancers. . . . The one I have loved forever — my most cherished plaster figure lamp — is of Peter Pan looking nonchalant, next to a mushroom in the forest. It’s sort of pre-Disney, something that was common in the 1950s. It’s kitsch.

Question: Is there anything you would change about the room if you could?

Answer: Like a lot of things in a home from the First World War, there are a lot of little things that need fixing.

Question: Do you think of it as exclusively your room, or one shared with others?

Answer: It is a shared room.

Question: How long have you lived in your house?

Answer: Since about 1987.

Question: What community is your house in? What do you like about the area?

Answer: East Crescent Heights. We have very close ties with our neighbours. Many of our neighbours have been there for decades. We frequently have social gatherings, with solstice parties in the summer and winter. Our ability to walk to work is a central love of where we are. And there are probably 20 places to eat in a six-block radius, really good places. There are lots of Chinese and lots of Vietnamese restaurants; there is Diner Deluxe, there is Big Fish . . .

Question: Have you seen your street and/or community change since you've moved there?

Answer: Oh my, yes. There have been infills developed in our neighbourhood which thankfully have been very tasteful, and there have been a lot of changes to our two adjacent traffic corridors. Both Centre Street and Edmonton Trail have been quite transformed in the 25 years we've been there. Now Edmonton Trail at the top of the hill is like a mecca for breakfast eaters; and Centre Street has become like Chinatown north. There are a great number of Chinese businesses and restaurants, which are very much loved. And there's been a great deal more interest by the neighbourhood in the neighbourhood. People just seem to want to engage in that.

Question: What do you like most about living in Calgary?

Answer: I have been in the arts since 1980, and I was very fortunate to be at the forefront — myself and a group of my friends — of the birth of a lot of the Calgary arts scene. I love the fact this city gets behind its arts companies and I think it was a great testament, the recent naming of Calgary as a Cultural Capital of Canada. And look at that mayor of ours — he is a card-carrying fan of the performing and visual arts. We really are blessed.

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