

Brushes with genius

Five weeks, one city, 14 of the most influential artists of our time. If Harbourfront Centre tried it, would they come?

MICHAEL POSNER reports on the huge undertaking

TORONTO

In the beginning was an idea — a very big idea.

To bring 14 top-drawer, world-famous artists to Toronto to explore, exploit and try to explain the essence of their talent. Among them, Quincy Jones, Bernardo Bertolucci, Robert Rauschenberg, Pina Bausch, Lily Tomlin. Crème-de-la-crème folk. The likes of which we shall not soon see again.

No city had ever tried it before — maybe with reason. Not New York, not London, not Paris.

But now Toronto was going to try it. Toronto, where they eat successful artists for breakfast.

Exactly, says Bill Boyle, CEO of the city's Harbourfront Centre, which over the course of five weeks beginning Sept. 24 will host World Leaders: A Festival of Creative Genius.

"Canadians are appalling at appreciating individual creators," Boyle observed in a recent interview. "We dislike people who are successful, especially if they're Canadian."

So Boyle decided to go the contrarian route — pick one person in 14 separate artistic genres and build an entire evening around each of them. Reception. Fancy dinner. Performance. Discussion. Analysis. *Hommage*. Celebration. How unCanadian.

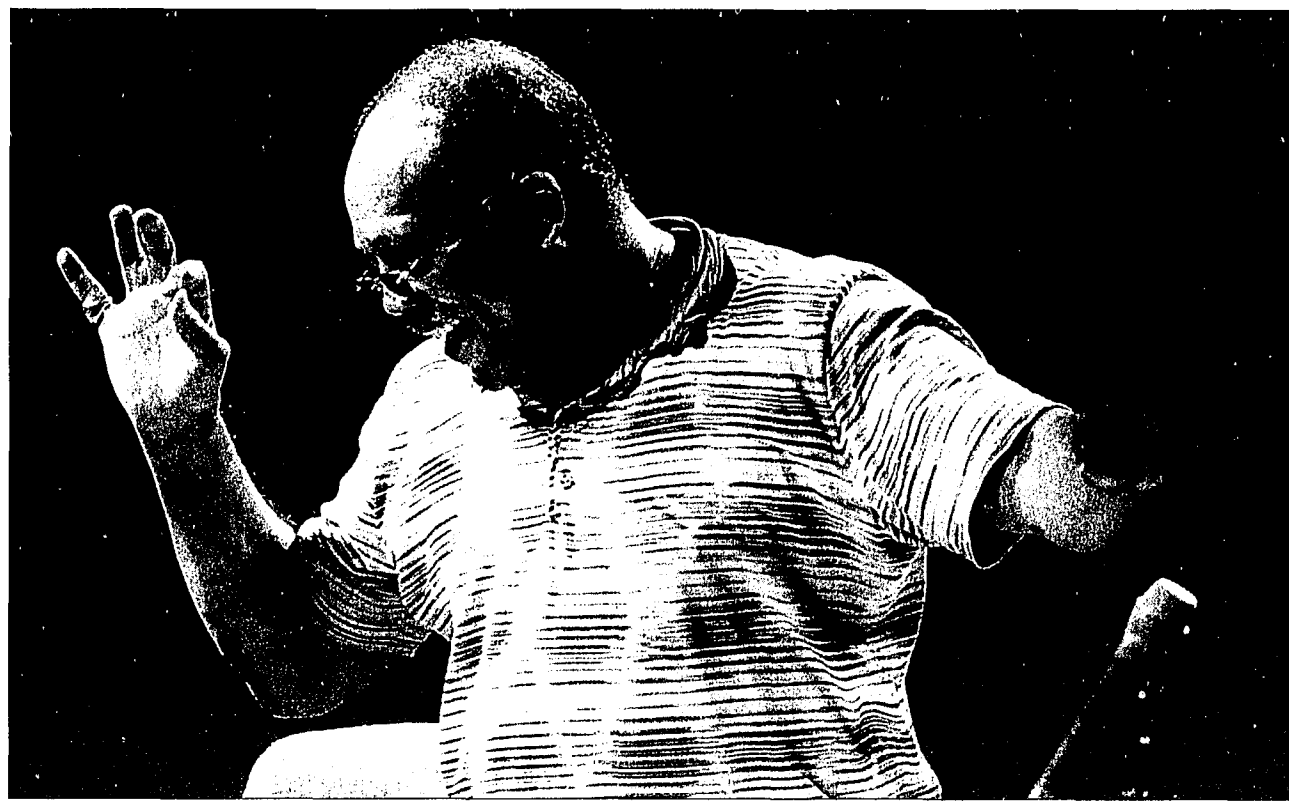
It began two years ago. Harbourfront Centre, a sprawling cultural cornucopia of music, dance, theatre, graphic arts, schools, summer camps and a fair bit more, was approaching its 25th anniversary. Boyle was looking for something that would properly mark the event, raise Harbourfront's profile and, not so incidentally, also raise a little money. But what? And how?

Enter Bruce Mau, ubiquitous design guru. These days, Mau's name seems to be everywhere. That's partly because visual design is recognized as an increasingly critical element of marketing, and partly because Toronto-based Mau's approach, successful with internationally trumpeted museums, newspapers, filmmakers, choreographers and architects, tends to be organic. Instead of imposing a concept arbitrarily, he works from the inside out.

With Boyle, for example, Mau said that the anniversary program, whatever it was, had to leverage the Centre's reputation for innovation. Long before they became household names, kd lang, Cirque du Soleil, Jerry Seinfeld and Barenaked Ladies, among many others, had appeared at Harbourfront.

After a series of discussions, Boyle and Mau agreed on the core concept — to select artists whose work was so original, so inspired, and so far ahead of the curve that it had utterly transformed their respective genres.

To help make the selections, Boyle sent e-mails to dozens of curators, critics, producers and other experts, asking them to nominate the single most transformational



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From top, left to right: Quincy Jones, Joni Mitchell, Robert Rauschenberg, Lily Tomlin, Peter Gabriel and Frank Gehry — artists whose work is so original, so inspired, and so far ahead of the curve that it has utterly transformed their respective genres.

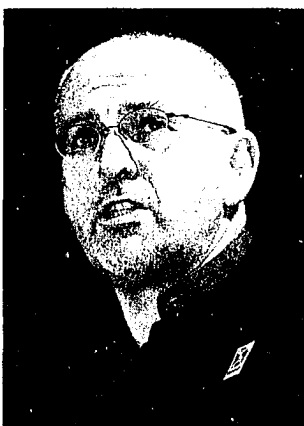
artist in their discipline. There were two caveats: the artist had to be still alive and still actively creating. Each e-mail adviser was asked to write a paragraph outlining the reasons for their choice.

Boyle was worried his e-mails would go unacknowledged or generate expressions of half-hearted interest or, worse, contempt for Harbourfront's chutzpah. Instead, the responses came back in record time, and were universally supportive.

A key issue, of course, was what to do about Canadian content. Boyle was insistent that if the central idea was to salute transformational excellence, Canadian artists couldn't be quota-fied onto the agenda. "I'd have been thrilled if we ended up with two," he says. As it turned out, four Canadians made the cut — Cirque du Soleil founder Guy Laliberté, stage and film director Robert Lepage, singer Joni Mitchell and architect Frank Gehry.

"The Canadian thing was solved without our really having to worry about it," says Boyle. "And most of the Canadians were actually recommended by non-Canadians."

The consultative process for nominations resulted in about 50 names. Then the hard part began — culling the cultural herd. Short lists. Shorter lists. The A-List. When



JIM BOURG/REUTERS



KRT

the final choices were made, Boyle realized that his opening gambit would have to be something the artists "couldn't ignore."

The result was a lavish, personalized invitation, printed on vellum, that explained what Harbourfront was doing. Even if there were teams of handlers screening their mail, Boyle reasoned, this communication would get through.

It was followed up with some old-fashioned, persistent salesmanship. "I think they realized that what we were trying to do was very unusual," he says. "To explore the nature of the creative process itself, and those things that had inspired them, and why their work had become seen as transformational."

Of course, it did not hurt that Harbourfront's recognition also included a cash prize of \$25,000.

While Boyle and his Harbour-

front team were working the phones, Mau came up with the campaign's pitch line — a somewhat cutesy play on the standard notion of world leaders. Not politicians, but artists.

"Okay, I love it," said Bernardo Bertolucci, when Boyle finally penetrated the director's *derma* of protective flunkies. "But what's with this world leaders thing?"

Boyle explained the point — that real world leaders were not politicians like Tony Blair or Vladimir Putin, but great artists.

"Well, Mr. Boyle," said Bertolucci, "I really admire your optimism."

The easiest "sell" was probably architect Gehry, a Toronto native who has long maintained close ties to the city, to Bruce Mau and to Harbourfront. The hardest, it seems, was Gehry's fellow Cana-

dian expat, Joni Mitchell. But the general challenge, says Boyle, was just "to penetrate the wall of people" these artists have assembled around them.

Boyle and two senior aides, Don Shipley and Tina Rasmussen, milked their networks, called in IOUs, and did reconnaissance — all of it designed to find people who could get the message through. Other friends of Harbourfront were tapped to endorse the Centre. The reclusive Japanese designer Issey Miyake, who opens the program Sept. 24, sent an emissary to Toronto to check out Boyle and Co. She spent a day here and afterward declined to make promises.

"What else can I do?" asked Boyle.

"Nothing," she said. "You've done your homework."

Eventually, of course, Miyake

said yes and has since consented to spending part of his celebratory evening demonstrating exactly how he works.

Others responded more quickly, including Broadway's Stephen Sondheim and composer Quincy Jones. But Bertolucci's yes was always provisional — depending on his film schedule. And it took months to make inroads with Peter Gabriel and French designer Philippe Starck. Just finding Starck was a tall order: He's constantly moving between the 12 houses he owns around the world. Boyle finally met him — and sold him — over drinks in New York. Comedienne Lily Tomlin insisted that any tribute would have to include her writer, Jane Wagner (Boyle readily agreed). American painter Rauschenberg, 72, fell and broke a pelvis — but is said to be recovering well.

Dozens of people recommended a night devoted to Cirque du Soleil, though few knew the name of its principal creator, Guy Laliberté, who has built a company of street performers into a global franchise valued at close to \$1-billion.

A great evening would require a great and large venue, something Harbourfront lacked. Here, Boyle got lucky. Toronto restaurateur Nick Di Donato had just signed a 50-year lease with the Ontario government to restore and manage an old building on the Canadian National Exhibition grounds. When it opens in September after a \$10-million restoration, the new Liberty Grand Entertainment Complex will feature three vast ballrooms capable of holding up to 3,000 guests.

The evenings themselves, says Boyle will "not be sappy tributes, please God," but occasions that, somehow or other, get to the essence of each artist's creativity. The somehow or other is now in the hands of a team of consultants, including film producer/director Niv Fichman, theatre directors Dennis Garnham, Duncan MacIntosh and Jeannette Lambermont, and designers Ken MacDonald and Paul Mathiesen.

Part of the challenge is distilling a sense of the staggering output of a Gehry or British playwright Harold Pinter. Rauschenberg, for example, has created 10,000 separate works of art. More broadly, Boyle et al. must design an evening that is at once intelligent, entertaining and illuminating — and yet plays to the unique identities of the honorees. In addition to Miyake wielding chalk and scissors, Pinter is expected to read from a new play. Starck will lecture, and Gehry will engage in a dialogue with former goalie Ken Dryden, on the connectedness of hockey and architecture.

For each artist, a satellite program of complementary events is also being scheduled.

There are, naturally, many ways to define success. An obvious one is to tally the box office — by late last week, tickets, at \$175 per ticket per evening, were 50-per-cent sold. Or you can compute the value of corporate sponsorships, including The Globe and Mail, American Express, KPMG and half a dozen other blue-chip names: \$1.3-million and counting.

Boyle prefers to look further out. "Success, I think, can only be judged 10 years down the pike. Ten years from now, will this have made a tiny dent in our psyche? Were we affected, transformed by what we saw or heard?"

Certainly, the event "wins as the most stressful thing we've ever done," says Boyle. "We've looked, but we can't find another model for it. I knew it was ambitious from day one. I now understand why."

World Leaders: A festival of creative genius runs at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre Sept. 24-Oct. 30. Information: 416-973-3000 or go to www.worldleadersfestival.com/.