

On galas and glitz

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Margo Roston did more than cover Ottawa's social scene for almost three decades -- she defined it. She started at the now-defunct Ottawa Journal in the late 1970s and moved to the Citizen in the early 1980s. It's not an exaggeration to say she'd been to hundreds of galas before she retired from writing her column late last year. She spoke with Style Weekly editor Joanne Chianello recently about the evolution of galas in Ottawa, how they've grown over the years and which stand out as her favourites. She recalls her most memorable evenings out on the town and what made these events so special. (Hint: it's got a lot to do with "glitz factor.")

How have galas in Ottawa changed over the time that you covered them?

Years ago I used to scrounge around (for events to cover) and go to people's homes who were having big parties. There was always something like the May Court Ball or music groups that would raise money, but it was mostly private events. When Ed Schreyer was governor general, (his wife) Lily loved parties and she loved the press to be there. They would have dances; there was a Halloween party there once. I even went to a party for Prince Charles once. It was a different time.

And now?

Over the years, these events became less and less private parties and more and more fundraisers. There's lots of people out there who support an organization and others who work for an organization and others who raise money. It was one of the reasons people like to be in the paper. It's recognition for the work they do. And the organizations love it because usually these are events that would never get covered. There is no forum for it.

You say in the past there were more big private parties, but they certainly sound like elite parties.

Galas, by their nature, are elite things. Look at English society, look at early days of Government House. These balls were always for the elite, for the social registry. I think that's why people want to go to these big events, they want to know who's there.

In theory anyone can go to today's galas. Doesn't that make a difference?

Yes, but it's a corporate elitism now. How many of those tables (at galas) are bought by private citizens? Very few. It's gone from being a social elite to a corporate elite. It has become expensive to go to the big events -- there's no getting away from it. The NAC Gala raises so much money, it's become so enormous, that music lovers who used to support it can't afford it. They can go to the concert, but not the dinner because it's gone beyond the reach of mere mortals. When it was smaller, it was really nice. Now if you're not with one of the biggest-giving corporations, you're falling off the back of the stage, if you can manage a dinner ticket at all. Still, I find it hard to say that's bad because, these events raise a lot of money for great causes.

What do you think a gala is? Has the meaning changed over the years?

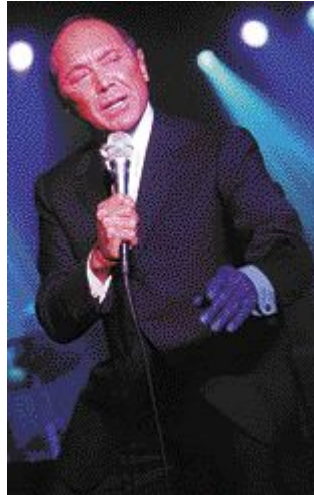
Well, everything's a gala now! But I actually looked this up and it says in the dictionary that "a gala's an occasion for celebration marked by joyous festivity and display." But that means that not everything that's big and expensive is necessarily a gala. But that's just me.

What, in Ottawa, do you think is a gala in the true sense of the word?

I think probably an on-going gala would be the Governor General's Performing Arts Awards. You have trumpets and fanfare and a real sense of occasion. That's not a ball. The Viennese Winter Ball is a ball. I've always been very confused by how everything's become a gala.

Are there any others that stick out in your mind over the years as true galas?

Adrienne Clarkson (as governor general) once gave a winter party and it was the most magical evening you could imagine. It was a party for media and the diplomatic corps. You could skate. You could take dogsled rides, sleigh rides. And everywhere you went there were lights, there were bonfires, you could toast marshmallows. The grounds were all beautifully lit with kerosene lamps -- it was enchanting. And then you went inside and had nice warm drinks and ate a fabulous dinner. That to me was a bit like going back in time. She was criticized for spending too much money, so it was cancelled.



CREDIT: Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen

Paul Anka, above, and Frank Sinatra, below, have both performed at fundraising galas in Ottawa. Their star power -- in conjunction with a smaller venue like the Congress Centre -- gave those affairs their 'glitz factor,' says Margo Roston.

In a city the size of Ottawa, with so many galas, do you end up seeing the same people at these events?

Absolutely! You're seeing business people. There is a sort of NAC elite and they're everywhere. You're seeing politicians less and less because they can't afford it and they're not allowed to accept tickets from people. The fun thing was always to go and see who was sitting with whom, in which corporate box. But politicians are much more careful about that now. Which is a good thing, but it's taken the shine off of it a bit. Unless you go to something like Politics and the Pen.

In what way?

The concept behind Politics and the Pen is that at every table there's one politician and one writer. You never know who'll be at your table. It's actually quite fun and one of the nicer events, because it has a little surprise to it. There should be surprises, I think. When people are planning events, they should look for something that's different. A lot of events in Ottawa go on and on and on because they work, they raise money. But I think the charm has been very institutionalized. We need something fun! All these events raise money from auctions, but frankly I find that quite stifling.

Do you remember the first event you covered that you would consider a gala?

I can't remember that far back! But the one event I do remember clearly was Barbra Streisand with Pierre Trudeau at the NAC. That was probably the most exciting. Another memorable one, a very long time ago, was an evening with Frank Sinatra. He gave a concert at the Civic Centre and there was a party.

What made it fun?

It was Frank Sinatra! I mean, my God, even if he couldn't sing too well, it was Sinatra. It was like Streisand. What you're thinking is, "Boy, am I ever glad I'm here." And it doesn't have to do with what you spent. It's just the glitz factor. I'm very big on glitz factor.

What gives an event its glitz factor? Is it more than just dressing up?

Oh, yeah. It's about who's there. People want to see a star. At a fundraiser for Parkinson's disease, several years back now, they brought Paul Anka, actually twice. But the first time it was at the Congress Centre, which is a smallish venue. I remember I said to (my husband) Gordon, "Paul Anka? Yuck." Well, it was just so much fun. They had a great dinner, the food was terrific. Anka came out and did his thing. He walked around the room so almost everyone got sung to. Everyone was stamping their feet and clapping. It was just a great evening.

You should have fun. "Festive" is the word the dictionary used.

Do you think Ottawa has too many galas?

They're mostly sold out, so how can there be too many? The more the merrier, I say. You know when it's not working because you're not selling tickets and you're not going to do it again.

Say you've never been to any of the balls or galas in Ottawa and this year you decide that, for fun, you'd like to go. How would you pick the one for you?

If you want a true ball, where you dance a lot, the Viennese Ball is wonderful (but it's hard to get tickets). It's very beautiful, it's very popular and everyone really dresses up. It's a classic, let's put it that way. The Black and White (Opera Soiree) is nice, it's got a little flair to it. And people know it's not super-serious opera because a lot of people who go to these things have never been to an opera. So it's a nice introduction to the music, it appeals to a larger crowd. The last time I went there were a lot of younger people at it and people were all turned out well -- they make a little effort.

Sometimes people go to specific events because they want to support a certain cause, or maybe they like the kind of entertainment. That's not a bad way to choose.

How has the clothing that people wear to these events changed over time?

People used to get fairly dressed up, sometimes even for parties at people's homes. Then in the early '90s it was all very wear-your-T-shirt-to-the-Oscars kind of thing. Everything was very downmarket, everyone dressed for success. Everywhere you went women wore black suits and just changed their tops, no matter what the occasion. Now I think people get very dressed up. The standards -- the Viennese Ball, the Governor General's, the Snowflake Ball, the Black and White -- people all wear long. If it's a black-tie event, which many are, women are really dressing up.

When did this happen?

I started noticing it about five years ago. Women were wearing long dresses, getting their hair done up, showing off some bling bling. I think for a while we lost track of the fact that we're supposed to be out having a good time.

Now that no one's paying you to go to every social event in town, what galas would you like to go to?

Are you asking me which ones I could afford?

Well, forget about that for the moment. **If you could just go, and not have to work, which ones would you choose?**

I'd probably like to go to all the major ones we've been talking about. Wait, I know where I'd go -- Evening in the Maritimes. It's a big to-do, they raise money for United Way. All the East Coast MPs come. They have an auction, but it doesn't interfere with the party part. They have a big lobster dinner and they bring in entertainers from the Maritimes. It's not super fancy but it's just a blast.

Anything else?

I'd go to Politics and the Pen because it's fun. People get up and move around. They talk to each other, they yack, they schmooze. Mostly what I would do is watch for something new. That's my whole thing. Someone is going to come up with some wonderful event, even if it's just a one-timer. I'm going to sit back and wait to be surprised.

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