



Savannah Walling, associate artistic director of the Heart of the City Festival, says the volunteer-driven community event offers everything from paper lantern-making workshops and film to comedy, music, visual arts, dance, walking tours, food, storytelling and much more. — KATHERINE FLEITAS

Festival celebrates city's heart

COMMUNITY: Take in hip hop version of Romeo & Juliet or Keithley's history of punk

JOHN P. MCLAUGHLIN
SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE

The noise level of social upheaval from the United States had reached a deafening din come 1968.

The civil rights movement was at its furious height when Martin Luther King was assassinated that year and the Vietnam War was a staple of the nightly news, convulsing America and dividing it deeply, often along generational lines.

That was the year Savannah Walling, newly graduated from Stanford University, packed up and came up the coast with her then-draft-resistor husband to cross the border into Vancouver.

There wasn't a whole lot going on in town then. It had half the population it does now, eating out mostly meant Chinese or steak and, if you wanted a brew, you were relegated to hotel beer parlours where you sat at little round tables covered in terry-cloth and made do with cigarette smoke for atmosphere.

Special event

9th Annual Heart of the City Festival

When: Oct. 24-Nov. 4

Where: Various Downtown Eastside Venues

Tickets: Most events free, see heartofthecityfestival.com

Indeed, booze was the overwhelming drug of choice in the Downtown Eastside those days, then more pro-saically known as Skid Row.

But when Walling eventually settled there, she immediately saw beyond easy clichés to a neighbourhood rich in history and bubbling with latent talent. She has championed the place ever since.

"It was a much quieter city and a much lower-rise city," says Walling.

"And although there was cultural mixing, it was not nearly as culturally mixed as you see now. Nor was there as strong and visible an aborig-

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— Savannah Walling

inal presence at that time, at least for a newcomer.

"People didn't lock their doors and there weren't all the bars on the windows that you see now.

"We found a kind of community of people around us. We got involved with the Ukrainian Hall over time and that was a place where there were multi-generational groups gathered around it and events, supper, music.

"And then there were events around the Strathcona Community Centre we would go to. And I would take my son with me when we would go to the Carnegie Library and sometimes he would play chess."

In the years to come, Walling and

husband Terry Hunter would be deeply involved with some pivotal cultural events in the DTES. She is trained in dance and music, he in music and theatre. In the early '80s, they founded Vancouver Moving Theatre. Though it has staged performances through North America, Europe, Asia and Australia, its roots remain in the DTES.

Alongside entrenched local cultural events like the Powell Street Festival, the two started the Strathcona At Home Festival, which really got them involved with the community. When the Carnegie Community Centre decided to celebrate its centenary in 2003, they were invited to co-produce the Downtown Eastside Community Play, a big hit which ultimately begat the Heart of the City Festival.

This is a massive, volunteer-driven community enterprise covering everything from workshops (paper-lantern making!) and film to comedy, lots of music, visual arts, dance, walking tours, food, storytelling and

much more. It's quite dizzying.

For her part, Walling has a few recommendations, not least Dal Richards' combo mixing it up with the Carnegie Jazz Band.

"That's a great love for me," says Walling, the festival's associate artistic director. "I've always loved the music of both groups and to have them come together, I find extremely, extremely exciting. I'm looking forward to the Sharing Our Stories: Bread and Salt event at the Ukrainian Hall, where they're going to be sharing some of the stories from the Ukrainian community. And I'm very excited about the walking of the Chinese drug stores and of the waterways. For me it's a doorway into this place that I live in.

"I'm looking forward to the hip-hop version of Romeo & Juliet; I'm looking forward to the session with Joe Keithley and the history of punk. I'm interested in the one-pot cooking demonstration and I always go to the aboriginal feast."

So much to see, so little time.