



**Gaston Bellemare, founder of the International Poetry Festival in Trois-Rivières, Quebec
(Interviewed by Cécile Oumhani)**



Gaston Bellemare

Why did you create this festival?

I was a president of a poetry press in 1983 and I wanted the public get better acquainted with poetry.

I walked into my classroom at university and I asked my students: « What can we do to reach this goal? » I came back an hour later. They all said: « If you organise a festival, the media are going to speak about poetry. If the media speak about it, people will come and they will be able discover it and enjoy it. It was my students at university who gave me the idea of this festival. »



to

Did you get any subsidies?

Only one for the first edition of the festival which lasted three days. I met the minister of Culture at the Book Fair in Quebec City and he gave me twelve thousand dollars as a subsidy. We invited fifty poets, after agreeing about the amount of money to be paid to the poets with the Union of Québécois writers. The following year, we got the cafés, the bars and the restaurants in downtown Trois-Rivières involved. It was the beginning of a new model of the relation poem-poet-public. That year, the festival became a festival of poems given to to the public by poets only. Then, over the years, financial support started coming from governments as well as private companies.

Was this an act of resistance?



This was a way of not slowly dying.



How did Trois-Rivières become the « capital of poetry » ?

Félix Leclerc was our main guest for the first edition of the festival. As an introduction to his reading, he said - I quote from memory, thirty-three years later- Cape Diamond is the capital of wild geese, Montreal is the capital of jazz, so why wouldn't Trois-Rivières become the capital of poetry? But a capital needs to have equipments. Otherwise it is not a capital. Over the years, we started hanging poems on the walls of the city. We got three hundred in 1994. Then, 104 more. We created the Monument where the mayor of the city comes every year with a wreath of carnations. On February 14th, on Valentine's day, he pays tribute to all the poets in the world. It is the only place in the world where this is done. We had a mailbox of the government of Canada installed, recycled with the colors of the festival, where the public from the city and the tourists come and leave us poems. Streets and buildings have been named

after poets. There is a large path in the forest along the Saint-Laurent river, where we pay tribute every year, during the festival, to each of the poets who have died during the year. On a pedestal, a photo of the poet is put with a short biography and one of his/her poems, all in materials resistant to all weather conditions. Their memory remains alive. And for about fifteen years, during the festival, five thousand poems float on our poem lines in a park downtown.

The city is always very supportive and grateful for our actions.



How did the festival become international ?

At first it was strictly Québécois. We became international with our sixth edition, while remaining a French language festival. We invited French poets Guillevic and Franck Venaille. They each represented a different conception of poetry. Then the public -for whom we created this festival-asked to hear poetry in other languages. We have always been attentive to the public. For us, it is important that poetry should be addressed to the public, who respects through a high-quality silence, the words of the poet, which touch people in their deepest inner lives. We became the largest silence festival in the world. Because only this silence allow the poem to be passed on from the soul of the poet to that of the public.



How do you go and meet these international poets and overcome the barriers of distance and languages?

I read about a hundred books of poems a year, in French, in English and in Spanish. I have attended about forty different poetry festivals and worked with fifty-one poetry publishers in seventeen countries, on four of the five continents. If they published a Québécois poet on a co-publishing basis, we would take a poet from the country of the publisher, chosen by him. I have published eleven hundred books of poems in my life. Almost half were co-published with these fifty-one publishers. I get in touch with them and they give me the names of their best poets for our festival.

What is the role of poetry in the world, facing crises, wars, violence?

Poetry is our inner life. It is the place where emotion lies, whether related to the outside or inner world of the poet inside us, life, love, death. All the words of other languages, of all dictionaries are there to give them their place in each of us, to enable them to nuance the everyday life of those three words. And there are only two essential verbs: to have and to be. Poetry is the verb « to be ». We live in a world that is only interested in the verb « to have ». And « to have » takes up more and more of our space, our spirit and the need to be. All human beings feel. « To have » is an illness spreading more and more throughout the world.

Poetry allows us to be and to grow. Giving more depth to what we are has nothing to do with the verb « to have ».

Translated from the French by Cécile Oumhani