we're back!

By Sean McLennan

The hottest event in town is back! After a year-long hiatus, Calgary Cares is returning with "Pulse", a heart-pounding evening of music, poetry, fashion and dance. If you haven't gotten your tickets yet, you're well advised to get on that soon: **calgarycares.ca**— tickets are available online this year. March 23 is the night, but it will undoubtedly sell out early.
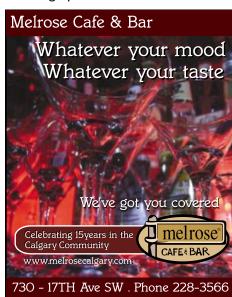
If you've been to Calgary Cares before, you'll know what I'm talking about—if you haven't, you don't know what you're missing. "Hottest event in town" isn't just hyperbole—in fact, Calgary Cares has the awards to back up its reputation as one of the best events in the world. In 2005, it won its third Canadian Event Industry Award for "Best Entertainment Production"; in 2004 it was awarded three international awards: Gala, Esprit, Westie awards; in 2003 it was awarded the "Best Entertainment Production under $25,000" by the International Special Events Society (Western Region), and the "Best" Theatrical Entertainment Production Worldwide" at the Special Events Magazine's Gala Awards, one of the most prestigious awards in the industry; 2002... well, the list goes on. Suffice to say, Calgary Cares has garnered international acclaim.

So what goes on? There's a cocktail reception with light entertainment followed by a show and dance, with a silent auction throughout. The lineup doesn't capture what makes Calgary Cares unique though—it's just the structure wherein the alchemy occurs. Take the most recent Calgary Cares: 2005's "Pillow Talk". The energy is as much about the people that attend as what they come to see—you're as likely to see someone in their underwear as you are in a tux. Or maybe just body paint. One year a woman came in her wedding dress ("When else would I have a chance to wear it again?"). Calgary Cares is an opportunity for people to comfortably express who they are, and maybe push the edge a little. After all, the event is about breaking down stigma and judgment.

Cameron Zinger, one of the organizers of "Pulse" and past Calgary Cares dancer and model, cites the diversity of attendees as one of the biggest reasons for the events' success. University students mingle with CEOs, gay, straight, old, young—everyone's there and for one night, those demographic barriers aren't a social hindrance and everyone is united by their passion and compassion for a cause that touches us all.

A "show" also doesn't do the event justice. The spectacle at "Pillow Talk" was part fashion show, part dance number, and part Cirque de Soleil. What makes the performance even more remarkable is that the seventy-five or so performers and choreographers are volunteers—in fact the other sixty or so staff needed to
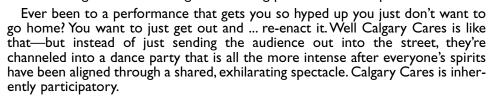

execute the evening are also volunteers. Without the dedication of these individuals, Calgary Cares wouldn't be able to raise half the money it does, if it could survive at all. "Pillow Talk" raised $170,000 in 2005. The passion the volunteers have for Calgary Cares shows through. It's almost tangible and a big part of the atmosphere.

Ever been to a performance that gets you so hyped up you just don't want to go home? You want to just get out and ... re-enact it. Well Calgary Cares is like that—but instead of just sending the audience out into the street, they're channeled into a dance party that is all the more intense after everyone's spirits have been aligned through a shared, exhilarating spectacle. Calgary Cares is inherently participatory.

While in the midst of one of the best parties of your life, it's easy to forget why you're there. "Pulse" is meant to ground the event to what it supports. The intent is to "globalize" HIV/AIDS in our minds—everyone has a pulse. It's one of those universals of human experience that we all share and it reminds us that on fundamental levels we are more alike than different. It plugs us metaphorically into the pulse of the world and our civilization, and reminds us that a threat to the individual is a threat to us all, because in this day and age everything circulates through our populations as much as our blood circulates through our bodies.

HIV/AIDS is without exaggeration, the most serious health crisis human civilization has faced, and ironically, the virus's success has as much to do with culture as it does with biology. While here in Canada, it doesn't usually top our list of immediate concerns, we'll one day have to face the fact that the collapse of an entire continent (as Africa is poised to do) will have a rippling impact around the world as surely as losing the polar icecaps. AIDS Calgary (under the direction of Sue Cress) does fantastic work in our community providing support to people living with HIV and AIDS and spreading awareness so that we can prepare for what is to come. It deserves our support—Calgary Cares is AIDS Calgary's largest fundraiser and contributes significantly to the wealth of services and programs they provide. And honestly, in this case, contributing is hardly altruistic—attending Calgary Cares is reward in and of itself.

When no Calgary Cares was announced for 2006, many worried that it was the end of the event. According to Cameron, they just needed some time to re-evaluate. Every year, they had been raising the bar and the organizing committee wanted to make sure that the trend was sustainable. He says this year will be no exception. "Pulse" is back at Calgary Cares' traditional venue, the Jack Singer, this year and is still pushing the limits with the "sexed up" style it is known for.

By the response, it seems people missed Cares last year; Chris Heustis, another one of Pulse's organizers, said that people started buying tickets from the website the day after it went live—before any of the marketing was released. Otherwise, the community response has been likewise enthusiastic—the volunteers, and silent auction items have been relatively easy to secure.

Tickets are a little pricier than your average night out at $150 a pop but a portion of the price is tax-deductible and it's far from your average night out— every Calgary Cares is a memorable experience. Given that I met my husband at "Pillow Talk", I'll even go as far as "life-altering"! ▼

Photos courtesy of AIDS Calgary

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