The concertmaster steps down

Elizabeth Grandbois's benefit shows have put ALS in the spotlight, but now the disease is slowing her stride, writes

ALEXANDRA SHIMO

When Elizabeth Grandbois steps on stage on Saturday surrounded by some of Canada's greatest musicians, the moment will be bittersweet.

Celebratory, because this mother of two has pulled it off. Producing seven Concerts of Hope with Tom Cochrane, Dan Hill, Glass Tiger, Murray McLauchlan, Ian Thomas and Cindy Church is an astounding achievement, especially when Grandbois, the main organizer, is severely weakened by amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

But poignant too, because after five years of fundraising through live music events, these cross-country concerts will be Grandbois's last.

FERNANDO MORALES/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

'We are a medical minority': Grandbois in her wheelchair at home.

"It's time for me to pass the torch," she says, in her wheelchair at home in Burlington, Ont. "I don't have the strength any more to take on this huge undertaking."

The tour, which begins Saturday in Vancouver and winds up next month in Corner Brook, builds on five years of similar concerts in Hamilton and Ottawa, which have raised a total of $1.9-million toward ALS research and services.

See GRANDBOIS on page R2

‘They see the same things’

COHN *from page R1*

But he is also Kunuk’s creative soulmate. Ask Kunuk to describe their artistic partnership and he says: “I don’t know how to put it in words. He does what I do. Exactly. I found his videos so interesting and weird. Just like mine.”

Cohn is involved with Kunuk in every creative decision — every line of script, every camera angle, every casting decision. He does most of the shooting.

Toronto curator and writer Peggy Gale has watched them from the start, and like many people who know the story well, she sees a rare symbiosis in their union. “Norman and Zach realized when they met that they saw things the same way,” she says. “I think there was a blinding flash of recognition. They see the same things.”

The Journals of Knud Rasmussen is the ultimate expression of that shared way of seeing. “Basically, this is the film Zach and I have always intended to make with each other,” Cohn says, and you can see why. It’s about the meeting of worlds. Says Gale: “Zach brought to the project the need to tell the story of the end of shamanism. I think this is an issue that has been with him since he was a little boy. It is his brainchild and his *cri de coeur*.” But Cohn made it happen.

The film is set in the 1920s and describes the initial mutual curiosity and collaboration that flourished between whites and Inuit in that historical moment, and the synergy of their skills and ambitions. It tells the true story of Avva, the last great shaman of the Eastern Arctic, and his daughter Apak, a young woman who shared her father’s shamanic powers. They meet up with two European visitors (anthropologists from Denmark and Greenland), and together they travel many miles across the snow under adverse conditions, making their way to Igloolik. In the end, the family converts to Christianity, a decision prompted by their near-starvation.

In what is now established Isuma style, this pivotal moment is merely observed rather than editorialized upon, and this makes our witnessing of it all the more naked and charged. Kunuk and Cohn simply let us watch the story unfold, shooting in long, slow takes. Our perception of the pristine Arctic imagery is unharried by music or fancy sound effects; you can hear the snow crunch beneath their feet. The effect is mesmerizing, conveying both of the depth of the human soul and the almost unbearable beauty of the natural world.

It’s the kind of open gaze that has characterized Kunuk’s work right from the start, but those who know Cohn’s videos from before his Isuma days will see a lot of Cohn too in this cinematic vision. As he puts it: “Basically, I have been making the same film since I was 24.”

Where Kunuk began his life living the traditional nomadic Inuit way with his family (he went to Igloolik only at the age of 9, to start school), Cohn grew up in Washington Heights in New York (“basically, under the George Washington Bridge”) and attended Cornell University, where he studied literature with a view to becoming a writer. Working in Chicago and New Haven, he began his career as a “social-activist video maker” interested in early-childhood education. Among other things (such as some early children’s educational films), he pioneered the use of video in the classroom as an aid in teacher training, creating videos, he says, that served to promote a kind of self-witnessing.

He came to be exhibited as an artist later, after his move to the Maritimes. “The seventies became the eighties,” he remembers. “The funding for my work that used to come from social agencies under LBJ [former U.S. president Lyndon B. Johnson], like the Head Start programs, had dried up, and I was now getting my grants from arts organizations. By the time I made *Michelle on the Day of Surgery*,” he recalls, speaking of one of his early works from 1979, “it was being shown both in museums and as a training video for nurses.”

The video was one of six in his series *Children in Hospital* (1979-1980), shot in the Izaak Walton Killam Hospital for Children in Halifax. Watching it, you can identify Cohn’s signature gaze: patient, compassionate and deeply penetrating. Other works include *Quartet for Deafblind* (1987), arguably Cohn’s masterwork, an 88-minute document of his rapport with a deaf and blind child, made in a school for the deaf in Amherst, N.S.

OANA SPINU

Cohn (right) during the filming of The Journals of Knud Rasmussen: ‘Video is a medium for looking.’

“When we look at people, we normally do so for not more than about 10 seconds at a time,” Cohn says. “What I realized was that if you look at someone for, say, half an hour, or an hour straight, something else starts to happen. It’s illuminating. There’s a radiance.”

Video, then still a medium in its infancy, allowed him to do that. “Film is a medium for showing things,” Cohn continues. “The film is rolling and you’re already counting the money you’ve spent. The cost means you have to think in advance about how you’re representing something. But video is a medium for looking.” (Cohn and Kunuk continue to work in video today. Both *Atanarjuat* and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* were shot digitally and only later transferred to 35-millimetre film.)

Cohn’s first encounter with Kunuk came about 22 years ago, through a chance screening of one of Kunuk’s tapes in Montreal. “It was a video he’d made about a hunter killing a walrus. Basically, Zach had just followed the guy around with a camera. You were allowed to watch what was happening.” Cohn recognized a kindred spirit, and engineered the opportunity the following year to travel to the Arctic to train employees of the Inuit Broadcasting Corp. Kunuk was among them.

That training session took place in Iqaluit, but Cohn followed Kunuk back to Igloolik, where he lived off and on, for five years, as his guest, sleeping on Kunuk’s couch. In 1990, Isuma was formed. By then, Cohn had moved to Igloolik, though he established a second home in Montreal in 1994.

For *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, Kunuk and Cohn are jointly credited as co-writers and co-producers as well as co-directors. The credits also describe Cohn as the director of photography and Kunuk as the director of design. But the reality is far less clear-cut.

“I speak English,” Cohn says, “so I tend to deal with the funding agencies and all the white guys in the south. Zach speaks Inuktitut, so he handles everything that has to be done in that language. But people who have watched us working together know that, on a creative level, you can’t separate us.”

This collaborative approach is of a piece with Cohn’s impulse to make visible those people that are normally invisible, whether they be marginalized by age, illness or, in the case of the Inuit, by race. The impact of tomorrow night’s premiere on its black-tie audience will no doubt be immense, but the impact on the Inuit audience who first saw it in Igloolik earlier this year, Cohn says, was arguably even more profound. This is a people who have been rendered invisible, even to themselves.

“When I made the earlier video portraits, back in Nova Scotia,” he says, “I would always sit down at the end of the day and look at the tapes with whoever I was working with. People would always be afraid to see themselves. . . .

“But 99 per cent of the time, when they looked at the tape, they were thrilled. And you know why? Because people *are* more beautiful and more human than they can imagine. Humanity is beautiful. It’s our view of ourselves that’s shit. And what I’ve found is that people’s humanity can be made visible if you look hard enough. I found a medium that enabled that to take place.”

The Journals of Knud Rasmussen opens the Toronto International Film Festival at 8 p.m. tomorrow at Roy Thomson Hall. It will also be screened at 6:30 p.m. tomorrow in the VISA screening room at the Elgin Theatre and Friday at 9:30 a.m. at the Ryerson Theatre).

‘It’s . . . hard to say no to Elizabeth’

GRANDBOIS *from page R1*

“Her vision is remarkable,” says Kevin Hicks, who has helped Grandbois produce the concerts since they began in 1992. “This was a really ambitious undertaking. A lot of people didn’t think it was going to work. But it’s easy to say no to the concept, [and] hard to say no to Elizabeth.”

One reason, Hicks says, is her presence and generosity of spirit. Although the disease has confined Grandbois to a wheelchair, and she finds it more difficult to talk, the 54-year-old does not seem sickly.

“Elizabeth is so beautiful, sometimes it’s hard to make people believe that she’s actually ill,” says Elizabeth Cochrane, who met Grandbois when her husband, Tom Cochrane, performed at her first benefit concert. “She’s radiant. It’s very difficult to watch someone with so much vitality and passion lose their life. People take for granted basic life. She lives every moment.”

At 54, Grandbois has already lived longer than expected. ALS causes the degeneration of motor nerve cells, which control movement through electrical impulses to the muscles. As the cells degenerate, the muscles weaken. The gradual loss of control, which begins in the limbs, extends to the lungs, and people lose the ability to breathe. About 80 per cent of patients die within two to five years of contracting the disease.

In the nine years since she was first diagnosed, Grandbois has lost strength in her arms and legs. Her voice has lost its vibrancy, and where she once loved to sing, now she only hums. Her feet swell and her joints hurt. Despite these changes, she defies the disease that will eventually reduce her to a brain trapped in an inert body.

Scientists do not know the cause of ALS; most of those who contract it, like Grandbois, have no family history of the disease. About 3,000 Canadians have ALS, and two or three die every day (a number far higher than the official AIDS death count in Canada). There is no known cure; the drugs that are available, such as Rilutek, extend life expectancy for just a few months.

“ALS and other neuromuscular diseases are tragically and unacceptably overlooked and marginalized because we are a medical minority,” Grandbois adds. “We are not a priority. In truth, we are not profitable for the drug companies because we don’t live long enough.”

Grandbois is well versed in how the disease ravages the body, and the fate that awaits her. ALS is expensive because sufferers lose the ability to care for themselves. As the disease progresses, the expenses add up: There are the modifications that must be made to make a home wheelchair-accessible, medications and nursing — only a small proportion of which are covered by the government.

The ALS Society of Canada estimates that ALS puts a family $140,000 out of pocket over the course of the illness, which is why fundraising efforts for families and for research money are desperately needed, says Bobbi Greenberg, the society’s director of communications.

“We need more research dollars to find a cure and more awareness of this disease, which is why efforts like the Concerts of Hope are so valuable,” Greenberg says.

For her part, Grandbois hopes that someone else will take over and organize more fundraising concerts next year, when her health prevents her from repeating this ambitious undertaking. “This is an example I want to set for my children and all Canadians,” she says. “I want people to understand what is possible in the face of such difficult circumstances. This is my last gift to Canada, because I don’t know if I’ll have the strength to continue.”

Canada’s art dealers face challenge over resales

SODRAC *from page R1*

After that, King consulted his intellectual-property lawyer, Christopher Pibus, as did Vancouver’s Heffel Gallery Ltd., a fine-art auction house. Auctioneers at Ritchie’s (which received a $60,000 invoice from SODRAC) and Waddington’s in Toronto have hired lawyer Aaron Milrad.

“We want the lawyers to sit down and negotiate with us this fall,” SODRAC’s lawyer, Martin Lavallée, says cheerfully. “We’re saying, at present, when works are sold at auction, artists don’t see a penny.”

Usually, artists are poor and collectors rich, so the principle is a good one. In Europe, artists can benefit from the increased sales values of their works through a system known as *droit de suite*, which has just been adopted in Britain. Here, artists are so far trying to capture some of those increased values by charging for image reproduction. “We’re not asking for a huge amount, just a licence for use,” says Lavallée. “So let’s sign a general agreement.”

But many in the arts community, from auctioneers to public museums, fear that licensing fees for images is only the “opening shot,” in the words of John McAvity, executive director of the Canadian Museums Association. “Artists groups really want *droit de suite* — that is, to profit from the resale of items in secondary markets. *Droit de suite* has killed most art markets in Europe. In my opinion, charging fees for images in catalogues is just the tip of the iceberg, and a step in the wrong direction.”

There are three collectives that represent the rights of Canada’s visual artists. While two quietly negotiate fee schedules with institutions, the more aggressive SODRAC “doesn’t seem to be afraid of a legal quagmire,” observes one copyright veteran. Fighting on several fronts, SODRAC is also going after private art galleries for using unlicensed images in their promotion materials. It has also billed the massive annual Toronto International Art Fair.

For their part, auction houses and art dealers warn that such additional fees could tip some of them out of business or drive them away from exhibiting certain artists (Sotheby’s Canada ceased to use images by Jean Paul Riopelle in its ads because the Riopelle estate signed with SODRAC). “When you represent the artist, you use reproductions to promote their work. If galleries and museums cannot afford to do so, the end loser is the artist,” says Patricia Feheley, president of the Art Dealers Association of Canada. “If a corporation is using an image on a Christmas card, artists should get their fair share. But this is so counterproductive it defies the imagination.”

“SODRAC’s out of control,” says Miriam Shiell of Toronto’s Miriam Shiell Fine Art. “It’s beginning to look like a cash grab. I’m telling my artists to give SODRAC a letter releasing it from all obligations to collect on their behalf.”

Some U.S. auction houses already do pay licensing fees to artist’s estates (such as that of Andy Warhol) for the use of images in catalogues, acknowledges David Silcox, head of Sotheby’s Canada. But Canada doesn’t have to follow. Silcox says that that there his colleagues here have a good “fair use” defence for their current practice. When newspapers like this one review art exhibitions, they illustrate the art. “Catalogues, like newspapers, are ephemeral, time-sensitive,” he says.

Still, the outcome of the coming battle is unclear. The federal government seems to agree that because the art market is partly about investment and speculation, creators should be able to capture some of their works’ increased value; in fact, Heritage Canada has helped fund SODRAC’s on-line service.

Naturally, such use of tax revenues enrages the small-business people who run commercial galleries and auction houses. “And now,” says Calgary auctioneer King, “my legal bills are starting to come in.”

Sudoku ©Puzzles by Pappocom

			9		3	1		6
		7	6				4	
							9	7
		5			1			
8				5				1
			3			5		
7	8							
	4				6	2		
9		1	4		7			

Fill in the grid so that each row of nine squares, each column of nine and each section of nine (three squares by three) contains the numbers 1 through 9 in any order. There is only one solution to each puzzle. Solution, tips and computer program at www.sudoku.com

Yesterday's solution

9	3	7	8	4	2	6	5	1
4	5	8	1	3	6	7	2	9
2	6	1	7	9	5	4	3	8
3	7	6	4	1	9	5	8	2
8	1	4	2	5	3	9	6	7
5	9	2	6	7	8	1	4	3
6	2	5	9	8	1	3	7	4
1	4	3	5	2	7	8	9	6
7	8	9	3	6	4	2	1	5

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