

Curtain rises on 5-day homeless festival near Berri métro

Artists, volunteers pamper street people

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THE GAZETTE

They started lining up just before 4 p.m. Many had already had too much to drink. Some were tired, others were cranky and almost all of them were hungry.

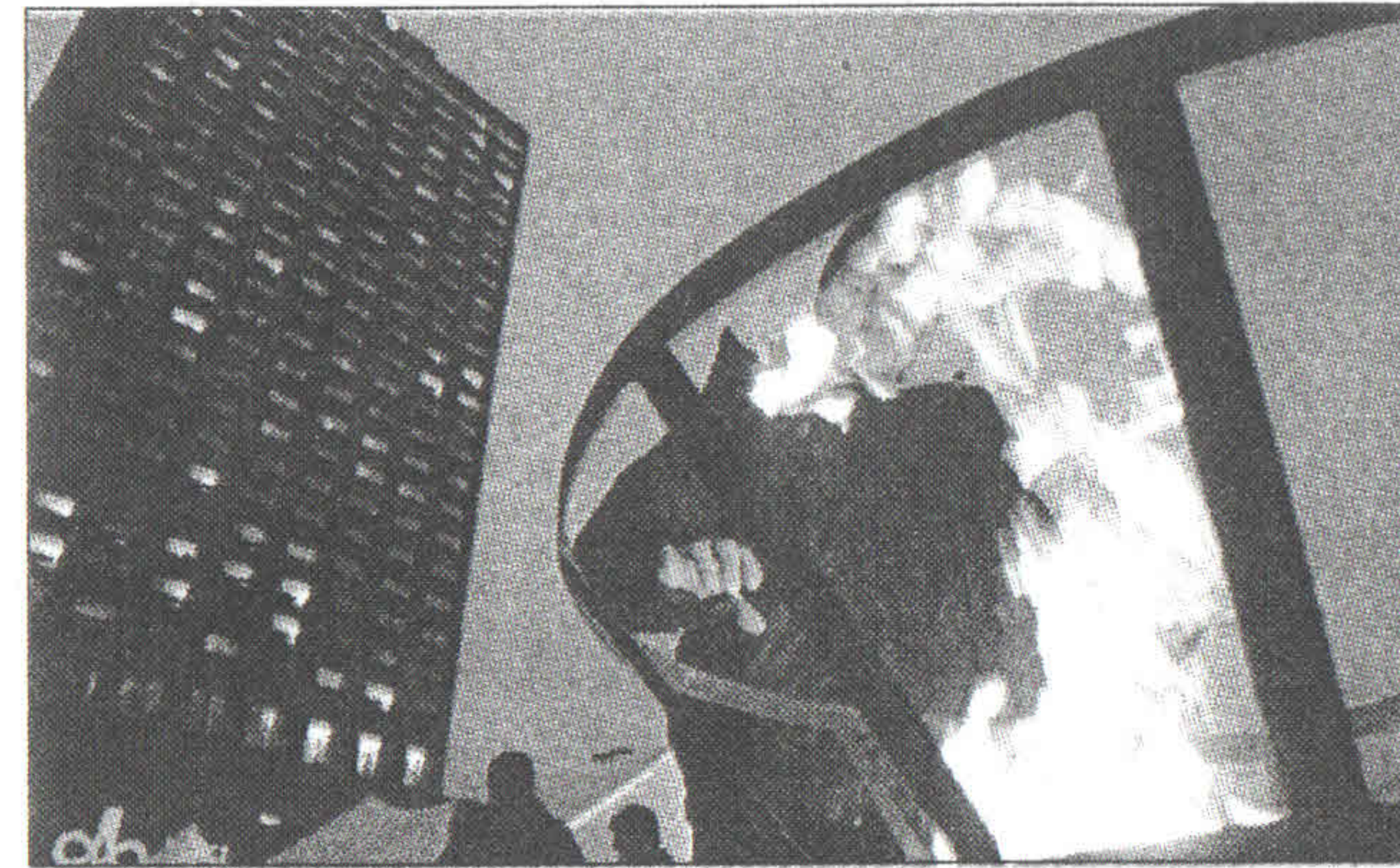
They had come to Place Émilie Gamelin yesterday, near the Berri métro, to fill their bellies with hot lentil soup and bread. It was the first day of an annual festival designed to raise awareness about homelessness and social exclusion in Montreal and the city's homeless community was out in force to

participate.

"I hope the food is good, because I don't eat anything just because I am hungry," said Eric Berthiaume, who has been on the street for 10 years.

From now until Sunday, the homeless will be pampered, fed, sheltered and entertained by hundreds of artists and volunteers who hope to give them a few days of good cheer.

"This is the rendez-vous of the year for the them – they feel at home here," said Annie Roy, who has organized the annual État d'Urgence festival for the past 11 years. The



PHIL CARPENTER THE GAZETTE

Sébastien Moreau warms his hands at the opening of a festival for homeless people at Place Émilie Gamelin.

festival brings together artists, humanitarian groups and the homeless for the five-day outdoor festival that runs

24 hours a day.

Organizers have set up an urban village in the downtown park, with big top tents

and open fires to keep people warm.

As several homeless people gathered around one of the fires, Bruno Gagnon said he volunteered to help set up the big top tents "because I had nothing to do and it gave me something to do."

Mary Tortolano, who had been homeless for six years until just recently, said she plans to volunteer at the festival over the next two days. "They are very nice people, they just have problems," Tortolano said.

Inside one of the tents, several people stocked up on warm winter clothing donated by several clothing stores.

"Look at my coat, it looks like it's worth \$200," one man said.

The festival is held each November to remind people of the difficulties the homeless face during the long winter months.

"It is an opportunity to understand a bit more about the world that exists beyond the walls of our house," said François Papineau, a spokesperson for Action Terroriste Socialement Acceptable, the group that runs festival.

Roy invited members of the public to drop by over the next few days and she asked the homeless community to be on their best behaviour. "These are the people you scare sometimes," she joked. "Be nice to them."

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