

The Future of Arts and Culture in Philadelphia

Kaci M. Fannin 16 May 2012

One of the great things about Philadelphia's current artistic climate is that multiple voices are able to co-exist here within and through various disciplines, such as theatre, music, dance, fine art or community-based projects, collectively reaching just about everyone, regardless of class, culture or creed. This is achieved through an array of artistic offerings like Philadanco (The Philadelphia Dance Company), the annual Philadelphia Film & Philadelphia Gay and Lesbian Film festivals, the Philly Fringe/Live Arts Festival, the Walnut Street Theatre, the Kimmel Center, and the incredible citywide Mural Arts Program, to name only a few.

As a local artist, I have the opportunity to experience Philadelphia's art and culture scene both as a player and a patron. Lately I've come to notice, from both sides of the fence, that the arts are inextricably tied to economy and commerce today more than ever. Our struggling economy not only has far-reaching economic significance but has social and cultural effects that could potentially have a long-term negative impact on our communities nationwide. This is especially true for the city of Philadelphia; with unemployment in Philadelphia County over 10 percent at the time of this article's writing (Bureau

of Labor Statistics 2012) and our troubled history of violence, a poor economy could potentially make a bad situation much worse.

The immediate fall-out from the downturned economy can be easily seen. Established institutions like the Philadelphia Orchestra filing for bankruptcy, for example (Wakin 2011). Everyone, from music venues to museums to theatres to the opera, is offering discounts on ticket prices. Yet, patrons still struggle to afford them. A day or evening of art and culture is becoming more of a luxury rather than part of one's lifestyle.

Despite all of this, there are other surface indications that the arts and culture scene is thriving and, in some ways, that's true. Almost daily I encounter young graduates from the city's various liberal arts universities, colleges and training facilities who are choosing to remain in Philadelphia as opposed to going to New York, Chicago or Los Angeles to start their careers. Several new theatre companies have started or raised their profile within the last 2 years and are doing well (i.e., Philadelphia Artist Collective, Quintessence, GoKash Productions). Six up-from-their-bootstraps theatre companies were recently able to make that leap from small, struggling entities to players in the Philadelphia theatre community by coming together and forming the Off-Broad Street Theatre Consortium (Cofta 2011). Venues and organizations like the Kimmel Center, the Pennsylvania Ballet, the Opera Company of Philadelphia, and the Philadelphia Pops have

seemingly been able to maintain high production values.

However, the more realistic picture shows artistic entities of all sizes scrambling to develop new marketing strategies, and perhaps even revamping their mission statements or searching for ways to "re-brand" or make themselves over. There is strong competition for shrinking patron and government dollars in an effort to survive this economy when so many organizations have not (Anderson 2009). Theatres, in particular, have been forced to cut back on the cost, size and number of shows produced. They have had to become more creative in their approaches to maintaining their subscription base as well as the cultivation of new patrons, all with less money in their budgets. Most artistic nonprofits rely heavily on some sort of government or private grant as a significant part of their operating budgets. Oftentimes, these grants are the only way of funding the community-based component of that organization's initiative. Losing any or all of that financial support can be extremely damaging to the community-based programming of most arts organizations.

Unfortunately, the loss of this type of outreach causes a negative social and cultural backlash that reverberates within our local communities. Statistics show that cuts in arts education have gone hand in hand with an increase in crime (Backstrom 2011). Conversely, studies have shown that there is a direct correlation between the implementation of community-based arts programming

and the decrease in crime over time (Steurer 2003).

Similar studies also show that arts and arts education in the schools (K-12) improve test scores (Patton 2011) and lead to positive outcomes related to prosocial development and academic achievement (Silbert 2001) (see text box).

Page 2

Given these types of results, it's hard to imagine why anyone would believe that the arts and arts education are not useful or are unnecessary. There is a demonstrated link between education (or lack thereof) and crime.

Allocating money that would have been spent on arts funding towards building more prisons is a short-sighted point of view. The long view is to invest in the future of our children, and hence our country, by redirecting government funds back into education and education-related programs across the board.

One way of doing that is by investing in community-based initiatives like neighborhood centers, which date as far back as the 1800s. The mission of these centers is to bring "resources, education and connection to emerging neighborhoods" with the vision of "individuals and communities living up to their full potential"

(Neighborhood Centers, Inc. n.d.).

Neighborhood centers have been extremely successful in effecting change within communities and the individuals

therein. As a pre-schooler in Houston, Texas, I benefited greatly from the wonderful arts and cultural enrichment programming that the center in my neighborhood offered. It was there that I had my initial exposure to the fine arts and heard my first piece of classical music, beginning my love affair with Debussy and Mozart. It was in this environment that I discovered my love for poetry and talent as a visual artist.

My experiences at neighborhood centers along with strong family values focused on education helped to foster positive self-esteem in me as a child. These things gave me a broad view of my place in the world, allowing me to develop into a well-rounded, well-adjusted adult who, I hope, makes a positive contribution to society.

In 1963, the Neighborhood Centers Association was established to help plan, coordinate and budget the work of neighborhood centers. However, the government has overlooked the history of the positive contribution of these centers, and currently these centers are sorely underfunded nationwide. It's my belief that funding and raising the profile of this initiative and others like it would go a long way to addressing the long-term negative effects of today's economic climate on our collective communities.

All said, one might conclude that with continued funding cuts and the resulting repercussions therein, the future of arts and culture in Philadelphia might be grim. On the

other hand, as an artist, I know that we are most brilliant when faced with adversity. Artists invariably know how to "take a sow's ear and make it into a silk purse," as we say in Texas. Perhaps we can use the current economic climate as an opportunity to discover new talents and skills that will lead us to innovative approaches to raising the capital necessary to continue the much needed outreach that helps to connect art, culture and community.

I choose to believe that the future of arts and culture in Greater Philadelphia is bright. I believe this community of artists has the talent and good old fashioned chutzpah to reinvent itself in a way that not only fosters local financial and economic recovery but also allows us to continue to nurture and care for our communities the best way we know how: through the arts.

Kaci M. Fannin is an actor, director, producer and independent filmmaker currently residing in the Philadelphia area. Previously residing in Los Angeles and New York, Ms. Fannin has produced and directed for stage and film and as an actor has enjoyed success on stage, television and as voice-over talent for industrials and commercials.

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