
It's the Art, Stupid!

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This essay is based on a key note address given on Tuesday, October 29, 2002. The talk was preceded by a short media presentation that told the story of Angels in America in Charlotte through sound and images.

We learned an important lesson through *Angels in America*. It was not an easy one. Before *Angels* came to Charlotte, our community rested on its laurels of tolerance and its track record of diversity. For decades we perceived ourselves as an inclusive community. Charlotte, where Protestant churches helped raise money to build our first Catholic church, where whites escorted blacks to sit with them at segregated lunch counters. Charlotte, where women have broken glass ceilings in locally headquartered *Fortune 500* companies, where newcomers are embraced with open arms and expanded places at the table. Our wake-up call took the form of a play by Tony Kushner.

The content of the play would serve to expose a growing evangelical movement that threatened the community of Charlotte. An ultraconservative Republican majority on the County Commission responded to the play with unimaginable intolerance of homosexuality, unprecedented cuts in public art support, and unthinkable attempts at censorship. Suddenly our citizens were no longer just an audience for *Angels in America*; we were living the play. *Angels* sparked conversation in pulpits and at dinner tables; talks about sexual orientation, censorship, and basic rights. Everyone in Charlotte was talking *Angels in America*.

And then a most extraordinary civic process unfolded. Cultural advocates, bolstered by the content of the play, became a political force. They were joined by Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Jewish houses of worship united in opposition to the intolerance. In turn, these religious communities were joined by our colleagues at colleges and universities. Our institutions of higher education were joined by major industries and corporations, and all of these individuals and institutions were joined by a galvanized gay community, heretofore largely unorganized. Evidence of these comings together was everywhere to see. The emerging institutional ties were of course the most obvious, but the growing bonds between individuals did not go unnoticed.

I remember opening the newspaper one morning to a poignant story about a gay employee at Bank of America.

He had decided to leave Charlotte in face of the controversy. Hugh McColl, chairman of the bank, contacted him with a personal appeal to stay, and a promise for change. Stay he did, and change was orchestrated.

In my life I have never witnessed so powerful a local community-building process. Its expressions were very concrete. Hundreds of thousands of new dollars were raised for the arts. Giving to our United Arts Fund increased so dramatically that the campaign became – and still remains – the highest per-capita nationwide. Influential Democrats and Republicans united to raise tens of thousands of dollars, directed toward the election of tolerant politicians. They were successful, and a newly elected County Commission restored public arts dollars with significantly increased allocations.

To this day that community-building process continues. Three local election cycles later, tolerance and public art support remain litmus tests for public service. Local major employers now offer same-sex benefits in growing numbers, and just last month our newspaper agreed to print same-sex union announcements in the social column. When intolerance rears its ugly head, we in Charlotte look at each other and remind ourselves of *Angels in America*.

Bob Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone* calls on the arts to help stem the tide of declining social capital in the United States. Putnam points to the power of artistic and cultural content to allow for public celebration and exploration of community. He notes that an especially moving, shocking, insightful, or original work might compel us to discuss social, spiritual, or political issues with friends and family members. Herein lies the community-power-building of the arts.

Richard Florida recognized that power in his much-talked-about book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. While Florida disagrees with Putnam on several fronts, the two agree on the community-building power of the arts. Florida maintains that communities of the future will be built by a creative class of citizens anchored by individual artists. He describes a society in which the creative ethos is increasingly dominant and effective.

Now this notion, that artistic content builds community, is neither original nor new, but it may be both overlooked and underrated by grantmakers, policy makers, and administrators.

Artistic content has been a critical strategy for fostering connections among citizens and institutions in Charlotte. Children's Theater of Charlotte, for example, commissioned playwright Ed Shockley to create a new play entitled *Stranger on the Bus*. The play's audiences relived school desegregation from decades ago in Charlotte. For a generation of parents and students far removed from that time, the work was a gift of common ground for contemporary school integration discussions.

When I was directing the Arts and Science Council, we stumbled over an artistic product that served to build community when we thought we were just funding an arts education program. Now you need to know, right or wrong, good or bad, I was the king of leveraging art support by piggybacking on issues perceived to be more pressing. At that time it was around literacy in the public schools.

Angels in America sparked conversation in pulpits and at dinner tables; talks about sexual orientation, censorship, and basic rights.

In concert with all of our major cultural institutions we created a massive literacy initiative built around the book *The Wizard of Oz*. An age-appropriate version of the beloved novel was bought and distributed to every third grader in our public school system. Simultaneously, all the teachers in the third-grade classes taught their students to read *The Wizard of Oz*. The arts then brought the words to life.

Each student was bussed downtown to our Main Street. When the students' feet touched the pavement, they found themselves on a yellow brick road painted across the sidewalks, connecting all of our major cultural institutions.

The first stop on the road was Spirit Square Center for the Arts, where young readers saw a full-scale production of the musical *Wizard of Oz*. Afterwards they found themselves back on the yellow brick road taking a trip over to Discovery Place, where "The Science of Oz" exhibition transformed the elements of *Oz* – from rainbow to hot-air balloon – into a science lesson. At one point each child walked past a blue screen placing him or her visually in the film skipping down that yellow brick road with Judy Garland and her merry men.

The opera company turned *Oz* into a cultural diversity lesson, comparing and contrasting the Judy Garland musical version to the later Michael Jackson version of *The Wiz*, and our African-American Children's Theater staged a full production of *The Wiz*. The North Carolina Dance Theater worked with the children to create their own *Dance of the Scarecrows*.

Meanwhile, over at Charlotte Repertory Theater, students were writing sequels about questions, like when *Oz* left in

the hot-air balloon, where did he go? Or imagine the flying monkeys coming back and painting the Emerald City blue. What happened next? Even the Performing Arts Center got in on the act, bringing a group of artists who used the witches of East, West, and North to teach a geography lesson.

This project was absolutely magical and stunning in scope and scale. We believe literacy was legitimately advanced.

But for all that energy, creativity, and educational ingenuity, one cultural institution took us to a higher community-building plane. The Light Factory, Charlotte's premiere photography center, commissioned a number of professional artists to photograph Charlotte in search of its heart, like the Tin Man; Charlotte in search of knowledge, like the Scarecrow; and Charlotte in search of its courage, like the Lion. These moving and powerful images of Charlotteans in pursuit of these three virtues stimulated conversation throughout the community, well beyond the target audience of third graders. Everyone was talking *Wizard of Oz*. We talked about what we value as a community; where we're going.

The *Oz* Project taught me the power of local cultural institutions coming together. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam makes the observation that such collaboration among arts organizations, where the bridging of constituencies takes place, has enormous implications for building community. He suggests that private and government agencies devote a greater share of their budgets to financing arts projects and productions that are broadly participatory and civically oriented.

Only one other time have I seen our local cultural institutions come together at such a massive a scale so that pride in community leaped forward. It was the day Bank of America opened its sixty-story headquarters facility right across the street from where we sit. Collectively we convinced the bank that this was our moment, not theirs, and the opportunity for the arts community was great.

A collaborative arts performance was staged on and in front of the new facility. It was performed twice and attracted 10 percent of our total population to the square, elbow-to-elbow.

The extravaganza began with original music composed for the Charlotte Symphony, which performed at the base of the tower. The momentum built with a massive choir of choral groups and church choirs from throughout the city. A choreographer got hold of our State Military Paratroopers and turned them into dancers. They cascaded down the face of the full-story towers, twirling along the way to the music playing below, as I cringed over insurance costs.

Our professional dance companies placed their dancers on the rooftop edges of adjacent buildings and balconies, spectacularly lit from back and front, and yards and yards of colorful fabric were tossed from balconies up and down the bank tower. These streams of fabric had great symbolism for our community. You see, the reason Charlotte is home to America's first- and fourth-largest banks is because of fabric.

Years ago, cotton, while harvested in the South, was not processed in the South. It was shipped to Northern textile mills equipped with the necessary electrical power to turn cotton into fabric. When electricity finally reached the South, it became more economical to build Southern textile mills than to ship the cotton north. There was only one problem: the South was without money to build the mills.

This financial need fast-tracked a banking system in Charlotte that would grow beyond anyone's wildest imaginations. Today our city of 700,000 is the second-largest financial center in the United States, with more assets than Chicago, San Francisco, or Los Angeles, all because of fabric. Artists were visibly making the connection for all of us to see, as massive streams of color were repeatedly thrown out of the bank building, rolled up, and thrown out again.

And then photographs six stories high were projected on the face of the tower. Professional artists were commissioned to photograph the places and the people of Charlotte, which and who contributed not only to the building of a banking empire, but to the building of the community the bank calls home. Certainly the day served to celebrate the community we had created.

In spite of these far-reaching celebrations in Charlotte, I find it is often difficult to engage cultural institutions in the community-building experiences. Frequently we find that individual artists are better equipped for the task. *Animating Democracy*, an excellent report by Americans for the Arts on the subject of arts-based civic dialogue, speaks to this issue. The report asserts that artists, often working independently of institutions, have pioneered and advanced art-based civic dialogue work. Unfortunately, within the field's existing infrastructure there are few systems and limited resources for these efforts.

Individual artists often have the flexibility to focus on a particular issue or on a particular segment of the community. *Animating Democracy* suggests that the choice of such a focus often emerges from concerns in the community, a galvanizing incident, or personal experience of the artist. Individual artists have translated these themes and stories into works of regional or national significance, or conversely, have looked at the local implications of national issues.

Perhaps we are witnessing an artistic genre that comes to us by way of "citizen artists." Certainly, many of our best visual artists working in the public art arena could be best described as civic or "citizen artists," although citizen artists can be found in any discipline.* Two examples come to mind.

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Liz Lerman, whom many of you know, is showing us how one artist can serve to build community through dance. Her work at New Hampshire's Portsmouth shipyard is an excellent example. Liz scoured the decks and people at the shipyards for stories about local citizens who built and served on shipping vessels. These life stories were turned into vignettes and performed on the shipyard grounds.

This past summer, just to our south in Union, South Carolina, artists Richard Geer, Jules Corriere, and Kevin Iega collaborated in the creation of a production entitled *Turn the Wash Pots Down*. The cast and crew of 100 local citizens presented theatrical renditions of memories and legends of life in a small mill town. The very purpose of the work was to build community among folks in a declining county with high unemployment.

These projects are powerful because the artist becomes a catalyst, helping people build and participate in community life, articulating their aspirations and grievances, and making art from the material of their daily lives.

When we fund community-building arts projects where artists examine provocative content, we fall short of our goals if we don't consider funding subsequent and accompanying programs. Arts administrators Pam Korza, Andrea Assaf, and Barbara Shaffer Bacon note that the arts can humanize civic issues, bringing forward the human implications. Often this is an emotional journey, and it can be difficult to switch from the intense emotion of the artistic experience to the rational response expected in civic discourse.

Animating Democracy points out that an artwork or activity may not always provide a literal path to that discourse. Interpretations, educational activities, and cumulative programming are avenues that may help people make the transition from the arts experience to the discussion.

Citizen participation is at the core of this work. In my experience funding sources often look with disfavor on civic orchestras, amateur choirs, and the like. Have we forgotten how important it is for us to go see our friends, relatives, and business associates on stage in our local

community theater? Have we forgotten how much that experience draws us together? When all of us watch the film or saw the Broadway production *The Full Monty*, didn't we get it? Didn't we see the power of amateur guys bringing together an entire town with their courage to literally expose themselves on stage? As grantmakers in the arts, let's not stick our heads in the sand when it comes to amateur participation in arts.

In another kind of example, a neighborhood in Charlotte recently raised money from households to cast a contemporary statue of a beloved man who lived among them. Hugh McManaway was mentally retarded. He would frequently wander the neighborhood, showing up at one household after another, whenever it suited him. Sometimes appearing in living-room windows, frequently at parties whether invited or not – folks just expected him to show up for dinner from time to time. This sweet man was welcomed with open arms wherever he went and whenever he showed up. Much of Hugh's time was spent directing traffic at the neighborhood intersection. He did so with a favorite towel that he would wave at the cars, instructing them to stop or go, to move right or left, without any regard to the traffic signals. Most households were connected to one another through Hugh and his antics.

After Hugh passed away the neighbors got together. They raised several thousands of dollars and they asked an artist to create a statue of Hugh directing traffic, with towel in hand. The work of art now stands at the very intersection he enjoyed so much. And this art work stands as a symbol of community in the middle of the most affluent neighborhood in Charlotte.

On a grander scale, Charlotteans have recently pooled their resources to honor one of their most influential community builders. Rolfe Neill published the *Charlotte Observer* for over twenty years. Most everyone in Charlotte looked forward to his Sunday morning column. Sometimes he made us angry; other times he brought us to tears. Always he stretched us. You could count on Monday morning debates over coffee breaks. He connected us in dialogue about important community concerns. Rolfe is a community-building artist of the pen.

When he retired, we were at a loss. Our citizens channeled that emotion into an artistic enterprise. Folks emptied their pockets to the tune of \$400,000. Artist Larry Kirkland was commissioned to create a public artwork in honor of Rolfe. Larry is truly a citizen artist who interviewed residents and read Rolfe's writings to get to know the man.

Larry discovered that Rolfe served as a beacon to our community. A two-story high stack of gigantic books engraved with the titles of Rolfe's writings will be constructed, and on top of the books will be a gold pencil,

only the tip of which touches the stack. The pencil appears to be held by the sky. On the ground, several key excerpts of his most influential writings will be engraved on large-scale books scattered on the site. A gigantic keyboard will be constructed for seating. A massive pad of paper will be built as an outdoor stage. Three large ink stamps will be engraved, the first with the words "See the truth," the second "Hear the truth," and the third "Speak the truth." Rolfe taught us to live by all three. The third stamp will be positioned for people to walk up into it like a pulpit, and themselves speak the truth as Rolfe always does.

Kirkland's artwork will be built in front of a \$30 million cultural center currently under construction that combines a new children's library with a theater complex for our professional children's theater company. The entire process has been about building and preserving community through content.

Look deep into the content of the art for the strongest and surest means of lifting community

In asking you to consider these citizen artists and community-focused projects I have said that individual artists may be particularly adept at this work. But I have not given up on our major cultural institutions. Unfortunately, institutions frequently approach the subject with false notions that community-building is somehow at odds with artistic excellence.

Perhaps those of us who promote building community through the arts are in part to blame. When community-building is only framed by the big three goals – revitalization, education, and social solutions – cultural institutions often lose interest. By framing the discussion in terms of challenging artistic content and excellence, we open rather than close doors.

The current exhibition of Romare Bearden's work at our Mint Museum of Art is a perfect example of community-building and artistic excellence, hand-in-glove. Romare Bearden was an African American artist born in Charlotte. The Mint convinced Bank of America to donate six important Bearden works to the Museum. The announcement was paired with the opening of the show, our major corporate donor enabling our community to permanently own art works of our native son at our museum of art.

Then the Mint uncovered all the private holdings of Bearden's work in Charlotte and asked their owners to place their works in the exhibition. When you tour the exhibit you are struck by how many Charlotteans own works by this important artist. The Mint has brought together many individuals from diverse backgrounds who

share a common appreciation of artistic excellence. On one wall hangs a Bearden owned by Harvey Gantt, architect, first black mayor, two-time Democratic nominee for the Senate, born on one side of the tracks in the South. On another wall hangs a Bearden owned by Hugh McColl, philanthropist, businessman, builder of the largest bank in the U.S., born in the South on the other side of the tracks.

But the Mint went deeper, organizing prominent Charlotteans, though not necessarily wealthy benefactors, to comment on the artist, the work, the subject matter, and the exhibition. The quotes run like a ribbon in large letters across the top of the gallery walls. And to add icing on the cake, and coming back to my theme of relevant content, several of Bearden's artworks explore Southern themes that speak to the citizens of Charlotte. Wow! Who says artistic excellence and community-building can't come together at major cultural institutions?

Every so often I take my three boys – seven, nine, and fourteen – to the Mint Museum of Art for only thirty minutes. I want them to enjoy it but not get bored, and thirty minutes also protects the museum. When I took them to see the exhibition of Romare Bearden, after thirty minutes I announced it was time to leave. You can imagine my shock and delight when they asked to stay longer.

I began my remarks by telling you that I stumbled on artistic content as the key to community building after years of promoting everything else. Don't make my mistake. Look deep into the content of the art for the strongest and surest means of lifting community. Perhaps my remarks will prevent others from having to look in the mirror and say to themselves, "It's the art, stupid."

Michael Marsicano is president and CEO of the Foundation for the Carolinas based in Charlotte, North Carolina which serves thirteen counties in both North and South Carolina. Marsicano came to this position from the Arts and Science Council in Charlotte, North Carolina, where he served as president and CEO for ten years. He serves on the board of trustees for Community Foundations of America and as chair of board of trustees for the North Carolina School of the Arts.

* See *The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena*, by Linda Burnham and Steve Durland; Critical Press, 1999. [Editor's note]