

CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

Advocate brings corporate efficiency to arts management

If Sally LePlay-Perry is just getting organized, then hold on. The revolution is ahead.

LePlay-Perry is the new cultural arts coordinator for Farmington and Farmington Hills.

She admits to being from the corporate communications world where she was a "change agent."

Talk about a facilitator with high expectations.

If the arts are going to become a more central part of community life and educational curriculum, creating the energy of people like LePlay-Perry is essential.

Until last March, she worked at MichCon, expediting organizational change at the one-time rigid, 136-year-old company.

Her job accomplished, she took a buy out and figured that it was time to move in another direction.

The change-agent was looking for her next target.

Then, last summer, she saw the ad for the arts coordinator's position.

She set her sight and moved quickly. Change-agents also have 20/20 vision when it comes to finding opportunities.

Good for business

"For our cultural arts program to grow, it must include businesses in the community," she said.

But first, the one-time practicing attorney knows that she must present a compelling case to demonstrate that supporting the arts is good for business.

Too often in the arts, there's a tendency to focus too narrowly on aesthetic ideals, rather than practical realities of making art happen.

There's art appreciation. And then there's inculcating the values of tolerance and discipline embodied in the arts.

Advocates like LePlay-Perry aim for the latter.

With no likelihood of major increases in public subsidies, LePlay-Perry understands the private sector must be educated on why it makes bottom-line sense to support the arts.

She's currently researching how a thriving arts scene enhances economic growth.

LePlay-Perry is looking for empirical proof in her studies of the cultural growth in cities like Seattle and Bethesda.

But that's only part of her job.

Telling the world

"Right now, I'm doing a lot of listening," she said.

Apparently, being a successful change-agent requires understanding the direction of the currents of public opinion.

Arguably, the Farmington area is at the vanguard of municipalities supporting the arts.

Not only are there 22 arts groups in the Farmington area, but there's a passionate volunteer spirit and an active arts commission.

Few other communities have given the arts such a high priority.

And now, it might be time for the Farmington area to take the next step: telling the rest of the world.

The stage is set. In two months, the third annual Farmington Arts Festival will commence.

The eight-day celebration has yet to take off to be a metro-wide cultural happening.

But there are encouraging signs.

In December, the First Annual Festival of Dance in Farmington brought together dancers throughout the area in a weeklong celebration.

There's a simmering buzz about changes in Farmington. It's more than serendipity that a change-agent is now in the house.

In fact, LePlay-Perry has already envisioned a Hollywood Opening theme for the kick-off gala for the art festival.

"I live and breathe the arts," said LePlay-Perry. "I see my role as helping to preserve the child in everyone through the wonder of art."

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STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN STORACALDO

Convivial: Meadow Brook Theatre is broadening its presence in the community through educational programs to schools, workshops for local playwrights and collaborations with community theaters. Karim Alwari, (left), Debra Wicks and Michael Vigilant are getting the word out.

REINVENTION BY REACHING OUT

MEADOW BROOK THEATRE'S GAMBIT TAKES SHAPE

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

After the frenetic pace of the last month, Meadow Brook Theatre artistic director Geoffrey Sherman finally took a day off.

Coming on the heels of producing the collaborative musical, "Thunder Knocking on the Door," Sherman changed hats to direct the demanding and intricate farce, "What the Butler Saw."

With bugs under his eyes and a cup of coffee within reach, Sherman returned early the next day from his day off to handle that other part of the job: chief visionary and ticket seller.

After decades of predictability, however, the sales pitch at Meadow Brook has changed dramatically.

Like many other regional theaters around the country, Meadow Brook is in the process of reinventing itself.

"We're at a watershed," said Sherman, who is in the last year of a three-year contract.

"For years we neglected our future because when money got tight the first thing that went was the outreach program," he said.

Producing acclaimed plays is the most obvious sign of a viable theater. But building an audience is just as mysterious and magical.

Typically, a theater may lose 20 percent of yearly subscribers. Last year, Meadow Brook lost about one-quarter.

There's no alarm, just concern and a

shared conviction that the theater must reach out to make its case to prospective audiences.

In the next few weeks, the professional theater on the Oakland University campus will hold a playwright's open house, conduct a statewide tour to public schools and reach out to community theaters throughout the area.

Then, in late April, Meadow Brook will collaborate with the OU department of music, theatre and dance in the Try Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning "Angels in America: Millennium Approaches" by Tony Kushner.

As the millennium beckons, Sherman is determined to heed the call.

Like a church

"We want to produce theater that will entertain and challenge our audience, to help them re-examine their lives," said Sherman.

Keeping in mind practical business realities, Meadow Brook must move ahead progressively yet cautiously.

With a modest subscriber base of 9,000, they must seek a broader audience by appealing to contemporary sensibilities.

Yet at the same time, Meadow Brook can't risk overlooking their longtime loyal audience.

"There isn't a major theater company in the country doing all new plays," said Sherman. "We owe a debt to the classics."

Perhaps that's the reason next season, according to Sherman, promises to be more conventional.

Ultimately for Meadow Brook to grow, said Sherman, the emphasis has to be on attracting a more diverse audience, making theater more relevant, and educating students and the general public about the value of theater.

But the strongest selling point, he said, must be that live theater is incomparable to other entertainment alternatives, such as television and movies.

"Live theater is like a church," said Sherman. "A living, breathing group of people becomes unified in a celebration of community."

Making a statement

Three years ago, Sherman's choice of August Wilson's "Fences" made a statement. That was the first time Meadow Brook produced a play by an African-American playwright.

Last year's "I Am a Man," about the Memphis garbage strike in 1968, and this year's "Thunder Knocking at the Door" were further attempts to appeal to African-American audiences.

Both plays were produced in collaboration with Flowshares Theatre of Detroit, an African-American company.

Along the way, however, there's been a few rough spots. "Thunder Knocking on the Door" was out of focus, and the

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Building a theater community

■ **Playwrights Open House** - Area playwrights invited to discuss theater and playdevelopment process with Meadow Brook's artistic director and playwright-in-residence, 7 p.m. Monday, Feb. 23, Meadow Brook Theatre, Wilson Hall, Oakland University, Rochester Hills, (248) 370-3403.

■ **"Page to Stage"** - an 8-session outreach program to 11th-12th grade students in Oakland County schools. Program culminates in a staged presentation at Meadow Brook, May 14-17.

■ **Teaching Company** - A theater for young audiences, featuring a six-week statewide tour. Program includes two 45-minute plays based on William Faulkner's short stories "Straw Soldiers," and "Wilderness." Adaptation by Karin Alwari.

■ **"Angels in America: Millennium Approaches"** - Produced by Meadow Brook Theatre and OU's department of music, theatre and dance, April 20 to May 17, Verner Steele Theatre, OU campus; (248) 377-3300.

■ **Now playing**
• "What the Butler Saw" by Joe Orton, Tuesdays-Sundays, through March 6.
■ **Coming attractions**
• "Murder by Misadventure," by Edward Taylor, March 18 to April 12.
• "Lost in Yonkers" by Neil Simon, April 15 to May 10.

■ **Upcoming**
• "The Merchant of Venice" by William Shakespeare, April 20 to May 17, Verner Steele Theatre, OU campus; (248) 377-3300.



Karim Alwari



Debra Wicks



Michael Vigilant

EXHIBIT



Sketchpad: Henri Matisse sits at the table in his Paris apartment, one of the 25 photos of famous artists from the first-half-of-the-century photographed by Michel Sima.

Photos reflect telling faces behind modernism

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

Long before artists sought their 15 minutes of fame, they appeared more serious minded and utterly untouched by commercialism.

Yes, that was before tell-all biographies, camcorders, the Internet and even television. And no, untouched by commercialism doesn't mean they lacked a monumental ego.

In a fascinating series of black and white photographs at the David Klein Gallery, the inner sanctum of the masters of modernism appears in a stark, novel light.

While much of modern art distorts or eliminates the presence of a discernible human form, the photographs of Michel Sima places front and center the faces of the most influential artists of the first half of the 20th century.

Unlike formal portraits, Sima's photos offer an insiders' look at Picasso, Matisse, Duchamp, Chagall, Leger, Miro, Arp, Giacometti, Braque, Utrillo, Le Corbusier and Calder, among others.

Working with the Sima estate, the Klein Gallery negotiated the first North American exhibit of the photographs taken between 1946 and 1957. Sima, who worked primarily as a painter and sculptor, died in 1987.

"Other than being photos of famous people, there's something quite artful about the photos," said David Klein.

"These are the people whose work I want to show in the gallery."

Spirit in art

Without resorting to artifice or props, Sima's compositions show an intriguing contrast between the artists and their work. Many of the photos were taken in the artists' studios or

What: The Modern Masters - Photographic Portraits by Michel Sima
Where: David Klein Gallery, 163 Townsend, Birmingham; (248) 433-3700
When: Through Saturday, Feb. 28
NOTE: Exhibit can also be viewed at <http://www.dkgallery.com>

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