

CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

Culture and the 't word' just won't go away

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following column contains explicit references to the "t word." Anyone with high blood pressure or low tolerance for discussion about the "t word" is hereby advised to look away.

The talk is about taxes. Not a tax refund, but a tax increase. A possible tri-county tax that would generate as much as \$40-million annually to support the area's 14 cultural institutions.

Culture and taxes is the subject of an opinion poll of Oakland and Wayne county residents. The poll taken last week was commissioned by Detroit Renaissance, a nonprofit organization after the 1967 riots to find ways to improve race relations and enhance the culture of the metro area.

Detroit Renaissance hopes to gauge the support for the arts tax before making a push for a ballot proposal next fall.

For the last several years, county commissioners in Oakland, Wayne and Macomb counties have debated the arts-tax issue.

The result has been a shared fear that voters won't support any tax increase, albeit a nominal 1/2 mill yearly property tax that amounts to about \$25 for every \$100,000 of assessment.

That's \$2.08 per month, or 48 cents a week to help fund the operating budgets of public places that offer exhibits, educational opportunities and a sense of perspective on our shared metropolises.

Who's culture?

A similar type of cultural tax has been enacted in Chicago, San Francisco and Denver. Three cities recognized for the diversity and richness of their cultures.

So what's the hang up in metro Detroit?

Many opponents of the arts tax believe that cultural institutions such as the Detroit Institute of Arts, Meadow Brook Theatre, Cranbrook Institute of Science, Detroit Zoo and Greenfield Village should figure out ways to support themselves.

Basically, ever since the National Endowment for the Arts funded a Robert Rauschenberg exhibit in the late 1980s, public money for the arts (or even to support cultural institutions) has been a hot-button issue.

How long before the public discussion gets beyond simplistic visions of liberals crying for freedom of expression and conservatives claiming that the private sector, not government should support the arts?

In European countries, taxpayers give up to \$50 a year to support cultural institutions. In America, it's less than a \$1.

Why the reluctance?

Beyond parochialism

In metro Detroit, commissioners in Macomb County won't even publicly discuss the arts tax. Apparently, since the cultural institutions aren't located in Macomb, the county commissioners believe their taxpayers shouldn't be required to support them.

Sadly, this is another case of parochialism sounding the knell for culture.

It's time to get out of the narrow-minded rut, and support the arts tax. But if the past is any indication, the arts tax will face a rocky road.

Perhaps it should be kept in mind that exhibits of art and history, as well as music concerts and theatrical productions are not just leisure activities.

On the contrary, participating in the arts is a means to understand the great stream of diversity that runs through our culture.

Anyone who keeps up with the news must realize that what our society needs more than ever isn't another tax break, but a better way to understand each other.

Building a better culture shouldn't be so taxing.

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A loophole of a dream

Local film producers look to Sundance, wide distribution

By FRANK PROVENZANO
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For two filmmakers on the hustle, David Stern and Michael Grogan are typically anxious, but confidently philosophical.

"We have no regrets, that's not to say it's been stress-free," said Stern, who, along with Grogan, recently entered their full-length film, "Loopholes," into the Sundance Film Festival, the equivalent of the Academy Awards competition for independent films held the last ten days of January.

In mid-September, Stern of Birmingham and Grogan of Orchard Lake expect to be notified that their work is one of the 60 films selected from more than 3,000 submissions.

If the absurdist-comedy "Loopholes" is indeed accepted at Sundance, Stern and Grogan will then have three months to submit a finished print of their film, which would cost about \$60,000.



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZOLNOST

Waiting their turn: David Stern, (left), and Michael Grogan inside the Barber Pole, one of the locations where they shot their new film, "Loopholes."

Money that they do not have in their budget.

Raising money to finance an independent film is a text book case of a dream meeting practical financial realities. Stern and Grogan are finding that business acumen, not artistic sensibilities may determine their success.

Name in lights

Last Wednesday, Stern and Grogan held a screening of "Loopholes" at a Troy Marriott conference room. Their intent was to persuade prospective investors to buy a piece of their film future at \$2,000 a unit. The film was viewed on VHS without sound effects or a musical score.

If "Loopholes" is picked up by a major Hollywood studio and distributed, there will be big-time dividends and silver-screen recognition for investors, according to the producers.

"The appeal (for an investor) is to have their name in lights," said Stern. "In the credits, we list investors under 'Thanks.'"

Of course, the holy grail for an independent filmmaker is to be considered the next John Sayles or to produce this year's version of "Sex, Lies and Videotape," "Brothers McMullen," or "Next Step Wonderland."

Underdogs Stern and Grogan eagerly point out to investors the recent financial success of "Blair Witch Project," a low-cost independent film that has grossed \$80.2 million in box office receipts, making it one of the most profitable films of all-time.

"Sundance (Film Festival) is a means to an end.

It's where the opportunities begin," said Grogan.

"The objective is to get into theaters."

Made locally

In the throes of raising money, Stern and Grogan seem to be guided by their experience outside the traditional film industry, rather than blind ambition.

Stern, 39, and Grogan, 45, aren't cocky upstarts right out of film school playing credit-card roulette, or mortgaging their homes to finance their film.

Please see LOOPHOLE, C2

What: "Loopholes," an independent film written and directed by David Stern, produced by David Stern and Michael Grogan
For more information, call (888) 477-9273.



Sneak preview: "Loopholes," (top photo) features lead actor Rob Rucker, center; Greg Trzaskoma, left, and Will Young. In the second scene, Rucker listens to Bill Sinishech, playing Uncle Izzy. The third scene shows Trzaskoma joined by Susan Owens, left, and James Shanley, center. In the fourth scene, Laura Ramm plays Ruby opposite Rucker's Wallace Silverstein. And the last scene has Ed Guest as Simon Balls.

EDUCATION

DSO makes overtures to young musicians

By LINDA ANN CHOMIN
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Attending summer music camp in North Carolina as a youngster changed Charles Burke's life. He hopes the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's Summer Institute at Meadow Brook had the same effect on 75 music students, ages 12-18 who spent two weeks honing their skills, under the direction of more than 30 DSO members, July 26 to Aug. 6.

The program, which renewed the DSO's commitment to training young musicians, coincided with the DSO's concert series at the Meadow Brook Music Festival on the campus of Oakland University in Rochester Hills.

"It was a turning point in my life, a chance to be away from home for the first time and to be surrounded by people who took music seriously," said Burke, coordinator of the Summer Institute reflecting on his childhood camp experience.

For the students, the intensive session in orchestral training "was a chance to learn from musicians in the one of the world's best orchestras," said Burke, adding the institute benefited DSO members as well.

"It went fabulous. It was a wonderful experience for everybody," said Burke, who is moving to Canton in October. "They were bombarded with everything they

could soak up from music literature and master classes to attending DSO concerts. The measure of growth was unbelievable. And the DSO musicians fell in love with the kids. They bonded and formed great relationships. The students felt comfortable enough at the intermissions during concerts to come up and say, hi coach."

Nathan Odhner thinks the best part of the institute was playing next to DSO musicians who sat in on some of the sessions. A senior at Rochester Adams High School, Odhner who plays French horn, is serious about seeking a career in musical performance. He believes practicing with professional musicians greatly improved his skills.

"The DSO musicians really made our camp by coaching our chamber groups and sitting in with us,"

New leader at museum intent to share history

By FRANK PROVENZANO
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Confronting disappointing attendance figures and an exhibit schedule that has been less than inspiring, the newly named president of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History is preparing to reinvent how history is presented to the public at large.

"Ultimately, it's about a sense of relevance," said Christy Matthews, 35, who will assume her duties on Sept. 20 as president of the museum in downtown Detroit's cultural district.

Matthews' tenure begins a few weeks before Graham Beal assumes the directorship of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

And like Beal, Matthews is promising a flurry of outreach programs, special events and workshops aimed at making the Museum of African American History more accessible to the general public. Her focus is squarely on transforming the museum into a "place for learning and public discourse."

Once Matthews settles from her move from Williamsburg, Va. where she served as director of interpretive programs at the Colonial Foundation, she expects to travel around the region.

"I want to reach out and know what people are looking for in the museum," said Matthews, who looks to assume a higher public profile than her predecessor, Kimberly Camp, who resigned last November.

Don't expect a stuffed shirt, or a bureaucratic approach. "I'm hands-on, regular folk," said Matthews, who was named Outstanding Minority Professional when she worked at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

In the past ten years, Matthews has been challenging old-school ideas about the role of a museum.

"To me, a museum needs to be about who we are and where we're at," said Matthews. "We're not going to be afraid to look at current social issues."

Without offering specific ideas, Matthews said she won't back away from controversial issues, or raise provocative questions.

"A contemporary museum just isn't a place that has interactive displays," she said. "Rather it's where you should ask: 'What is my community concerned with?'"

For instance, one possible exhibit, according to Matthews, could explore the effects of drugs and violence among young people.

"Think about it, what would we see if we put a video camera in the hands of kids who are at risk?"

While new programs and exhibits might get most of the attention, Matthews said she is committed to further developing the museum's permanent exhibit. She expects to add new media, along with more extensive living history and a theater program.

"Detroit is more than Motown and cars," said Matthews. "There aren't a lot of people outside the area that realize the great history of this area."

"My motto is: 'Let's share our history with the world.'"

The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History is at 315 E. Warren Ave., Detroit. It's open 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Admission is \$5 adults, \$3 children (age 17 and under). For more information, call (313) 494-5800, Ext. 0.

said Odhner, who will play with the Detroit Symphony Civic Orchestra, Metropolitan Youth Symphony, Oakland Youth Orchestra and Oakland University Symphony Band this fall. "You learn through osmosis. They know so much. When they sit in with our orchestra, you'd go to play something and they'd be so strong. You learned so much about articulation, sensitivity and volume. I also learned a lot about literature and modern repertoire. Literature introduced us to music I would have never listened to on my own."

When Odhner auditioned for the institute he also auditioned for the Detroit Symphony Civic Orchestra, the DSO's youth training orchestra which Burke conducts. As assistant director of education, Burke believes the civic orchestra and newly organized Detroit Symphony Civic Symphonica, aimed at students in late elementary through high school, helps develop young musicians and future audiences.

"We have an exciting season planned for the 30th anniversary including a program with a 300-voice choir in February," said Burke. The civic orchestra gives students access to DSO musicians on a weekly basis.

Auditions for the Detroit Symphony Civic Orchestra will be held Sept. 11. The first concert is Nov. 6. For information, call Samuel Nordrum, (313) 576-5161 or (313) 576-5100.