Arts & Leisure

Farmington Observer

INSIDE: Travel

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Sunday, October 19, 1997

CONVERSATIONS

FRANK PROVENZANO

Elitism in the arts? Talk to Nora Mendoza

For the last six years, Nora Mendoza of West Bloomfield has been on the front line. She's the type of warrior who hears the call to duty long before the rest of us understand that the war has commenced.

To make matters more confusing, the battle isn't with some unknown enemy. But with ourselves. Aldus Huxley's prediction of the decline of culture amid an attitude of indifference and mindless distractions resounds eerily.

The recently released report, "American Canvas," by the National Endowment for the Arts, points to several distressing trends emerging in American culture. The report offers a compelling analysis of the current state of nonprofit arts in America.

In a preface to the report, NEA Chair Jane Alexander observed: "It signals the complex and pressing needs of the nonprofit arts, the hunger for culture in our communities, and the urgency for action if we are to pass our cultural legacy, undiminished, to the children of the new millennium."

The 193-page document concludes: "Sad to say, many American citizens fail to recognize the direct relevance of art to their lives."

That's a statement that seems more appropriate to the Dark Ages, than to our multicultural world where artistic expression should be appreciated, not deplored.

For those who are artists, collectors or art supporters, the immediate response to the report is a palpable anxiety about the future of art.

The undisputed reality cannot be overlooked: many have not realized the liberating experience of opening up to accept and understand a work of art.

Dealing with "why," however, must come after yet another justification for the prominent role of art in both our daily lives and public life.

And for that, Mendoza makes a compelling case to challenge those who subscribe to the NEA's chilling conclusion.

Art & common sense

Recently, Mendoza was reappointed to the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs. As a member of the council, she oversees the grant selection process and works to persuade state legislators to loosen up the public purse strings to support arts groups around the state.

As a volunteer, she travels to Lansing several times a month for meetings. Precious time away from her passion: painting.

Since the drastic state cuts in the early 1990s, funding to the arts has increased steadily. But it's still way behind the level 10 years ago. Today, funds go primarily to major cultural institutions, such as the Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan Opera Theatre and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

Unlike in the past, many of the smaller arts groups have been left to fend for themselves while the larger institutions scrap together public money to make up their operating budget. Successful fund raising, more than ever, has risen to the level of an art.

In this competitive environment for funding, Mendoza brings a real-world view. Simply, she's mindful that the true purpose of art is to cultivate a

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To receive a copy of "American Canvas"
Contact: Office of Public Information, National Endowment for the Arts, 1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20506, or call (202) 682-5400.
Additional information: online at http://arts.endow.gov
There is no charge for the report.

Next Sunday: "State of the Arts"
First in a series of stories examining how local artists, arts groups, museums and others are working to cultivate culture in our communities.

BEYOND THE WALLS

CRANBROOK'S NEW PRESIDENT BEGINS TO BUILD BROADER COMMUNITY

STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZOLINSKY

New steward: *Dr. Robert Gavin, president of the Cranbrook Educational Community, brings more than 30 years administrative and teaching experience to his new post.*

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

Today, those thousands of tree seedlings planted by George and Ellen Booth nearly a century ago at Cranbrook create a sylvan enclave from suburban stress and urban angst.

While the assorted colored leaves attest to the stark transition to autumn, the natural surroundings are more of a reminder of the slow, organic pace of change that permeates the natural and social life on the Bloomfield Hills grounds.

Entering what appears to be a placid world – more suited to reading Thoreau than finding hooting tattooed students – is new Cranbrook President Robert Gavin, who assumed the post in early September.

Gavin, a former 12-year president at the liberal arts school Macalester College in Minnesota, has an administrator's doggedness and a scientist's analytical drive. The one-time chemistry professor is only the fifth president in Cranbrook's 93-year history. The schools, generally referred to as the Cranbrook Educational Community, were established in 1927.

It'll take a least a year, longtime Cranbrook supporters claim, before the first signs of Gavin's distinctive vision will become clear.

"I'm not going to do anything dramatically different from what was done in the past," said Gavin, whose lean physique and deliberate manner bears a slight resemblance to a young Charleton Heston.

The internationally recognized Cranbrook Educational Community includes Brookside Lower School, Kingswood Girls and Boys' Middle School and Kingswood Upper School, Art Academy, Institute of Science and the Art Museum.

"We'll build on what's in place," he said. "My role is to build teams, coordinate the various elements at Cranbrook and bring the community together to achieve their goals."

Clearly, this isn't a place for Moses-like miracles. There aren't desperate calls for reforms. Nor a pressing need

Cranbrook President Robert Gavin

to resolve an impending crisis. At Cranbrook, as one member of the board of trustees noted, nothing is broken.

Yet with two of the region's most prominent public art and science museums, there's a growing interest in Cranbrook's renewed vision.

Inclusion at exclusive campus

Even to the unknowing, Cranbrook epitomizes the learning environment of the wealthy, privileged and uncommonly talented.

For years, whatever happened inside the Cranbrook community was well guarded by those who sought privacy for those who attended and taught at the exclusive private school.

That's not to say they haven't had a few public controversies along the way.

In the mid 1980s, a highly publicized lawsuit was brought by a former personnel director, followed shortly by "Bagelgate," which exposed the discrimination of Brookside teachers who marked the files of Jewish applicants with the intent of influencing Jewish enrollment.

In the early 1990s, Cranbrook struggled with drastically cutting its budget after an unexpected enrollment decline. Yet the campus drew together when students and faculty members were stranded in a snowstorm in the Great Smoky Mountains, and when racial slurs were slung at the varsity basketball team.

In the Cranbrook vernacular, "community" has two connotations: the immediate educational campus, and the broader community at large. Within this context, the most heated discussions aren't about hot-button educational issues, but a thing called "strategic vision."

Coordinating and shaping the activities of the immediate Cranbrook community are Gavin's paramount responsibilities, said Robert Larson, board chair.

But Larson and the board also claim that the new president will play a highly visible role in fostering cultural development in the community outside the stone walls of the Cranbrook hamlet.

Beyond the walls

Gavin recalled an earlier time when he looked "beyond the walls." That was back in 1967 when he came to Michigan shortly after the riots in Detroit. He joined the efforts to help dislocated victims of the riot find shelter.

Thirty years ago, Gavin was an associate professor at Haverford College in Pennsylvania, where he later served as provost, from 1980-1984.

Since coming back to metro Detroit, he has been startled by the "American problem" of segregation. Few other metro areas in the U.S. are as segregated.

"We've got to get beyond Eight Mile Road being considered the line between city and suburbs," he said. Apparently, education initiative can also build bridges.

Educational challenges, said Gavin, are occurring at an unprecedented rate generated by technological advances and the lightning pace of

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Quiet provocateur earns lasting reputation

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

At the height of Roy Lichtenstein's influence in 1964, *Life* magazine published an article, asking, "Is he the worst artist in America?"

When Lichtenstein died several weeks ago, the more accurate question *appeared to be:* "Was he the most understood American artist?"

Several local gallery directors pondered the place of the artist whose large-scale cartoon paintings and attitude of poking fun at the seriousness of art ushered in the brief, but influential, Pop Art Movement.

"He drew attention that cartoons were an art form of the day," said Ray Fleming, director of the Robert Kidd Gallery in Birmingham. "He made us aware of the graphic quality used in commercial art."

Lichtenstein burst onto the art scene in the early 1960s when abstract expressionism was the dominant style. At the time, the notion of commercial art was an oxymoron.

A provocateur, Lichtenstein claimed he wanted to create art that was so despicable no one would dare exhibit it. He clearly underestimated the taste of Americans.

The effect of his art deflated the high-brow attitudes of those who had rigid ideas about what was "art." And by using subjects of popular culture, Lichtenstein made art instantly accessible to anyone familiar with mainstream imagery.

Heretical to aesthetic purists, no doubt. Yet a poke in the side of artists who took themselves too seriously.

Meanwhile, it has been largely the celebrity obsessed Andy Warhol and his depictions of soup cans and celebrities that have been remembered as the prototypical pop artist and pop-art expression.

"Lichtenstein was a true original, and as influential as Warhol," said Corrine Lemberg, owner of the Lemberg Gallery in Birmingham. "He's so typically American in that he brought in everyday culture into his work."

Lemberg, who met Lichtenstein when he gave a lecture three years ago

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Bogus expression: *Roy Lichtenstein distilled painting to its most basic elements.*

THEATER

STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZOLINSKY

Biting humor: *Playwright Bill Boyer, a former Birmingham resident, draws on the contrasting ways of life in the suburbs and city.*

A playwright's alternative view of growing up in Birmingham

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

Sitting in a downtown Birmingham coffeehouse, Bill Boyer is at once comfortable and seems to feel out of place. Boyer, who now lives in Detroit, grew up a few miles away near Adams and Wattles roads, part of the prototypical sterile suburbia that he takes to task in his music, playwriting and general attitudes about life.

For the former Birmingham resident and Seaholm '79 grad, the visit to the locale where he was raised isn't a case of a prodigal son returning home. Rather, it's more like an adoptive son coming back to find no room at the inn.

In a word, Boyer's life and art are summed up as "alternative." His incisive off-beat playwriting talents can be appreciated in his newest play, "Marla In-Between," currently at 1515 Broadway in Detroit.

The subject of the play, much like Boyer's outspoken political views about economic and social injustice, won't be found in the catalog of mainstream entertainment. Frankly, "Marla In-Between" is about a woman who lives with her two boyfriends in an apparently "healthy" menage-a-trois.

In the story within a story drama, the triangle of lovers are actors of alternative theater who are trying to keep alive their own brand of art and theater. Add another layer: the characters' motivation is identical to the playwright's.

"The promise of theater is to touch the audience by creating this instant community right there as they watch the play," he said.

For Boyer, who admits to being wildly idealistic and provocatively political, there's a simple cause to which he has dedicated his life: to participate in a truly multicultural community.

He couldn't find it in Birmingham, he said. So, he packed his bags, drums and manuscripts and headed south along Woodward.

What: "Marla In-Between," a new drama by William Boyer
When: Through Sunday, Nov. 9.
Where: 1515 Broadway Theatre, across from the Detroit Opera House at 1515 Broadway.
Curtain: 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday; 4 p.m. Sunday.
Tickets: $10 in advance; $12 at the door: (313) 965-1515 or (313) 831-0665.

Creative to survive

Next door to Boyer's rented house in the Boston-Edison area of Detroit is an abandoned house. A sign affixed to the home warns potential arsonists that the site is under close neighborhood watch.

It's a long, long way from the manicured lawns and frequently

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