



AMERICANS
for the ARTS

THE 2001 NANCY HANKS LECTURE ON ARTS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Lecturer — Frank Rich,
The New York Times, op-ed writer and former theater critic

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THE JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTER FOR
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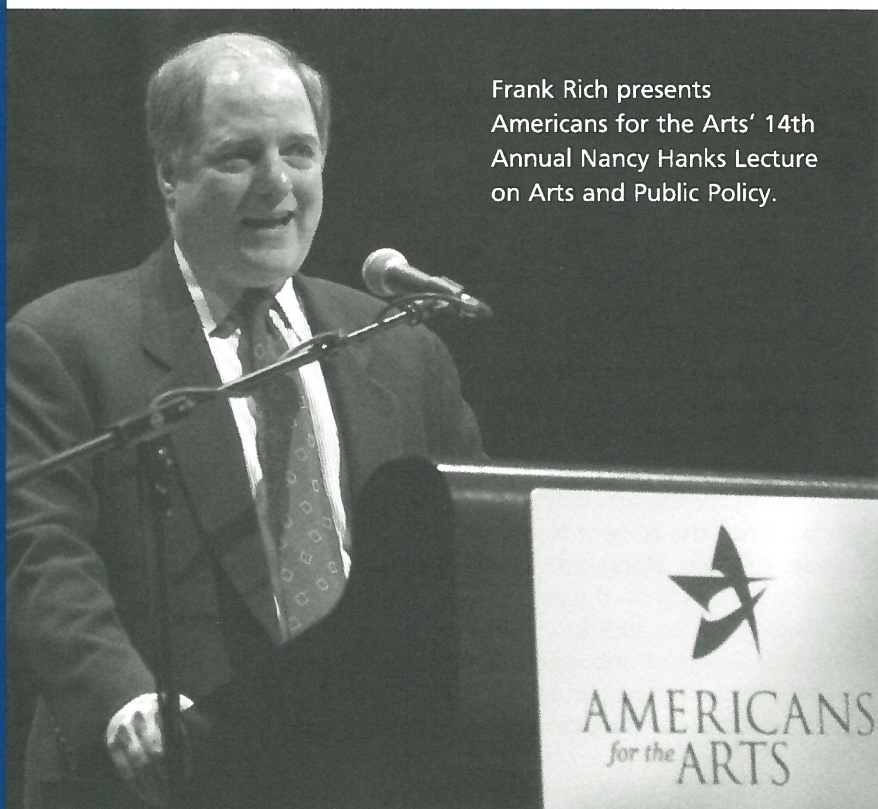
"In his insightful and incisive commentaries as a New York Times editorial columnist, Mr. Rich turned his astute powers of observation to politics in the broader cultural landscape. As in his theater criticism, always evident is a robust morality, lacerating wit, and a keen sense of history coupled with an unswerving belief in American culture and its ability to find its moments of epiphany and redemption."

— August Wilson, playwright

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Frank Rich presents
Americans for the Arts' 14th
Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture
on Arts and Public Policy.

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AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS

ROBERT L. LYNCH

Good evening. On behalf of the Board of Directors of Americans for the Arts, I want to welcome all of you to our 14th Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture on the Arts and Public Policy. My name is Bob Lynch, and I am the president and CEO of Americans for the Arts, the nation's arts information clearinghouse with a 40-year record of objective arts industry research. As a national arts advocacy organization, we are dedicated to representing and serving local communities and creating opportunities for every American to appreciate and to participate in all forms of the arts.

This particular lecture comes at a time of tremendous political, economic, and social change in the nation, and it gives us an opportunity to discuss how these changes—in the White House, in Congress, and in our fast-changing economy—may dramatically impact the arts and arts education in the country.

For those of you who are new to the Nancy Hanks Lecture, it was originally developed to honor the memory of the late Nancy Hanks, who served as the Chairman of the Board of Americans for the Arts, and then later went on to become Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. During Nancy Hanks' eight-year tenure as the NEA Chairman, under two Republican Administrations I might add, the agency's budget grew an astounding 1,400 percent, which ultimately changed the face of public funding for the arts in this country. And, tonight, we have in the audience the current National Endowment for the Arts Chairman, Bill Ivey, along with previous Chairs and members of the National Council on the Arts. I want to welcome all of you here this evening. In addition, we have here at the Lecture members of Congress and members of the Administration. The ones that I know for certain are Congresswoman Louise Slaughter and Congressman James Oberstar. Welcome tonight.

For the last decade, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts has been our gracious host in presenting this lecture series, and I would like to thank them for this opportunity and their generosity.

It is all about partnership and working together. And I would also like to give special thanks tonight to two new sponsors of our Nancy Hanks Lecture Series. The Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation, which for more than 50 years has tirelessly worked through its awards and program initiatives to encourage activity and commentary concerned with constructive social change, is our sponsor this evening.

The late Richard Rosenthal was an important advocate for providing free and open dialogue on issues that affect the education, health, and welfare of the nation. We are so very grateful to his legacy and the important public dialogue it brings us tonight in the Nancy Hanks Lecture. I would especially like to recognize trustees of the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation who are here with us tonight: Nancy Stevens Rosenthal, Jamie Wolf, and Joni Maya Cherbo. Thank you so much.

And I would also like to give special thanks to our sponsor, the Norman Lear Center at USC Annenberg School for Communication, which is a multi-disciplinary research and public policy center exploring the intersection of entertainment, commerce, and society.

Also here with us tonight is Cherie Simon, the Executive Director of the Lear Family Foundation. Many of us know her very well and owe her a debt of gratitude for all the wonderful work she did as the former communications director of the National Endowment for the Arts for the previous seven years.

I thank all of you in the audience for sharing Americans for the Arts' commitment to advancing the arts and arts education in America as we prepare tomorrow for Arts Advocacy Day.

I am also proud to say that there are over 300 advocates from all across the country who have come here to be with us tonight and tomorrow. In addition, representatives from 58 national co-sponsoring service organizations who will be canvassing Capitol Hill tomorrow morning represent thousands of cultural institutions in this country.

To further advance our own mission to increase funding and appreciation for

the arts and arts education, Americans for the Arts itself will unveil three major initiatives this year. First, in partnership with the Ad Council and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Americans for the Arts will unveil a multi-million dollar public awareness campaign to promote the value of the arts to a child's development, with public service announcements to begin airing in the fall.

Second, in partnership with the American Express Foundation, Americans for the Arts will undertake a 94-city economic impact study, looking at the economic impact and ancillary spending generated by the nonprofit arts community.

And, finally, this coming July in New York City, Americans for the Arts and our partner, the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, will gather over 1,500 of the nation's arts leaders responsible, collectively, at the state and local level, for over \$2 billion of public funding for the arts. This is the first ever joint conference held to develop an unprecedented joint action agenda on improving the livability of our communities.

And now it is with great pleasure that I introduce a young performance group that will inspire and remind us all of why our arts advocacy efforts are so worthwhile. The Woodstock SPEAKCHORUS, directed by Harriet Worrell, is a chorus of 13 students from Woodstock Union High School in Vermont. The SPEAKCHORUS uniquely presents short, rhythmic programs of literature, lyrics, and philosophy.

Last November, the Woodstock SPEAKCHORUS was one of only five groups in the country to be recognized by the Kennedy Center Alliance for Arts Education Network for an outstanding



The Woodstock SPEAKCHORUS, a chorus of 13 students from Woodstock Union High School in Vermont, performs short, rhythmic programs of literature, lyrics, and philosophy.

job of making the arts an essential part of a student's education. Tonight, we have asked the SPEAKCHORUS to perform a special tribute to our lecturer. Since Frank Rich is an artist of the written word, we thought it would be a fitting tribute to feature this unique SPEAKCHORUS performance in his honor.

[Performance of SPEAKCHORUS]

It is now my great pleasure to introduce our special surprise guest, the artist who will actually do the introduction of our speaker. His name is no doubt familiar to many of you because his plays have been performed throughout the country probably more often than any other contemporary author for the last 15 years. The scope of his work is enormous. He has chosen to chronicle the life of African-Americans in each of the ten decades of the 20th century, a daunting task for any artist to undertake. I speak, of course, of August Wilson. On my left is the set of *King Hedley II*, his eighth and most recent play, this one representing the 1980's.

In a unique arrangement for developing a new play, August Wilson's work for many years has begun its journey in one of our nation's many outstanding nonprofit theater companies, from your communities across the country—New Haven, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, San Diego, and Washington—moving among them as he continued his fine-tuning and treating regional audiences to a distinct new voice.

Eventually, his plays wound up in New York where they have received extraordinary acclaim, including a Tony Award and two Pulitzer Prizes for Drama. It was here that the paths of August Wilson and Frank Rich intersected. August wrote plays and Frank wrote about them. In fact, Frank had this to say upon being one of the first of the professional theater community to encounter August's work at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center National Playwrights Conference in 1982:

"Like most of the audience in the Barn Theater in Waterford, I was electrified by the sound of this author's voice, and surely I wasn't the only one who left *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* with goosebumps brought on by the play's unexpected aesthetic resonance. Mr. Wilson is the kind of writer who fulfills the Conference's goal to replenish our theater's future. Yet, eerily enough, he works in the same poetic tradition as the man who inspired the O'Neill Center's mission and who gave American theater its past."

A native of Pittsburgh, August Wilson has been a friend to Americans for the Arts since he delivered the keynote address at our own annual convention in his then hometown of St. Paul in 1997.

Two years later, many of us had the pleasure of being in the audience when President Clinton bestowed upon him the National Medal of Arts. Now a resident of Seattle and one of the world's great artist citizens, I give you a truly American playwright, August Wilson.

In his role of drama critic, Frank Rich stood as both witness and visionary. He took the common elements of dramatic criticism available to all critics, and rendered out of the simplest materials something extraordinary—a theater review that encompassed the entire history of the art, pointing it towards new horizons that enlarged the sayable and spoke of theater as architecture of the human spirit.

— August Wilson

AUGUST WILSON

Thank you. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you a man who, for 13 years, without peer and with great intelligence and sensitivity in his role as chief drama critic of *The New York Times*, was the unbridled conscience of the American theater. Born in Washington, D.C., Frank Rich is a graduate of its public schools. He earned a B.A. in American History and Literature, graduating Magna Cum Laude from Harvard College in 1971. At Harvard, he was editorial chairman of the *Harvard Crimson*, an honorary Harvard scholar, a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and the recipient of a Henry Russell Shaw Traveling Fellowship.

Mr. Rich began his career as a film critic for the *New York Post*, and film critic and senior editor of *New Times* magazine, before joining *Time* magazine as a film and television critic. Happily, Mr. Rich left that post and joined *The New York Times* in 1980 as its chief theater critic.

In his role of drama critic, Frank Rich stood as both witness and visionary. He took the common elements of dramatic criticism available to all critics, and rendered out of the simplest materials something extraordinary—a theater review that encompassed the entire history of the art, pointing it towards new horizons that enlarged the sayable and spoke of theater as architecture of the human spirit.

During his watch, the American theater gained as Mr. Rich agitated for a richer, fuller theater based on its age-old

dramaturgical values, and got one which gave voice to the sound—since formed— an urgency of contemporary American life, a theater that revealed the richness and complexity of the American character and gave Americans a greater sense of themselves and a greater understanding of all that they might, in their most privileged moments, encompass.

He agitated for a theater committed to the belief that life—singularly endowed with starless nights, embraced with the fervor of fresh hope—is worthy of every moment of struggle to assert the authority of our common humanity.

It is rare when the writing of a theater critic matches the quality of his observation, and over the years I have read Mr. Rich not only for the quality of his reviews, but for the sheer pleasure of his writing. Happily, that writing is on display in *Hot Seat*, a collection of his reviews during his years as a *Times* critic, and in *Ghost Light*, a beautifully written literary memoir that details his passion for the theater.

While we who work in the theater bid Mr. Rich a fond farewell after 13 years, it was an occasion marked by sadness and uncertainty. When he left his drama post, it was for a broader platform. In his insightful and incisive commentaries as a *New York Times* editorial columnist, Mr. Rich turned his astute powers of observation to politics in the broader cultural landscape. As in his theater criticism, always evident is a robust morality, lacerating wit, and a keen sense of history coupled with an unswerving belief in American culture and its ability to find its moments of epiphany and redemption.

In all of these roles, welded to the position of influence they embody, is also a responsibility, and it is a responsibility to proof, sometimes harsh and unforgiving, that requires of its exponents a courage and a commitment that is self-defining. It is a responsibility Mr. Rich has shouldered with grace and a formidable presence.

Ladies and gentlemen, Frank Rich.



August Wilson, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, introduces Frank Rich.

FRANK RICH

It is a great honor to be here in Washington today to deliver the annual Nancy Hanks lecture.

I come to you as a native Washingtonian—about as genuine an American oxymoron as there can be. But the Washington I grew up in, and whose public schools I attended, was a far different city from the one most of you know today. Hard as it may be to imagine now, you had to be something of a Sherlock Holmes to track down culture in the Washington of my youth, in the 50's and 60's.

In the day of Munch and Ormandy and Bernstein, the National Symphony was conducted by a well-meaning fellow whose arm-flapping musicianship earned him the not exactly affectionate nickname of Batman. Opera and ballet meant brief stays by touring companies playing standard repertory in awkward venues, including the old movie palaces on F Street. As for local theater, Arena Stage, then still a single stage, often had to go it alone under the determined leadership of Zelda Fichandler. There was the National Theater for Broadway road shows, but no Kennedy Center. For art, there was the National Gallery and a somewhat becalmed Corcoran but no East Wing, no Hirschhorn.

The local gallery scene was spirited and deliciously Bohemian, at least by Washington standards, but wasn't fashionable. My mother, courtesy of the National Council of Jewish Women, took oil-painting classes taught by Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis, but these artists had to make waves elsewhere to be appreciated in the Nation's Capital. It became a part of our family lore that if only my mother had availed herself of her teachers' canvases—offered for sale to their students at prices in the low three-figures—we would have been set for life.

And yet, despite the very limited cultural diet of the city I grew up in, and despite my mother's failure to capitalize on the art market, there was still enough here for me to be set for life, in the fullest sense. However slight the cultural menu in Washington, my parents exposed me to as much of it as they could.

I did see plays at the National and the Arena. On lazy afternoons, my mother would insist that we wander through the Phillips Collection, then just a single mansion, whose musty interior was, to use a Tennessee Williams phrase, "lit by lightning"—whether by the shimmer of Renoir or the dazzling hieroglyphics of Paul Klee.

We were just normal middle-class, Book-of-the-Month Club-subscribing, *Horizon*-magazine-reading dilettantes, but for me, at least, my earliest immersions in culture, however limited, took root. There's hardly a day that I don't think of my good fortune in having a life that has been informed by art—and haven't reflected back on just why and how I was captivated by the arts at childhood in such an unlikely place and with such scant indigenous resources.

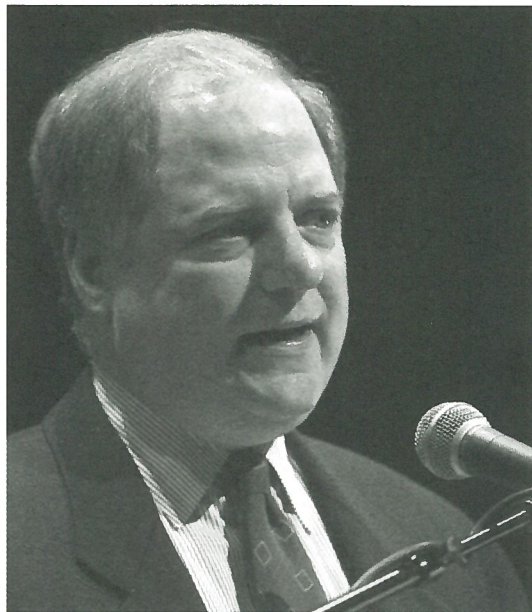
I left Washington at the end of high school in 1967. Nancy Hanks became chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts about 18 months later, at the dawn of the Nixon Administration in 1969. Though it would be wrong to overestimate the role of Nancy Hanks or any single person in this vast country's cultural scene—or any single force, the NEA included—her standards and ambitions are alive everywhere in the extraordinarily diverse and deep arts scene we have today. I know I join many here in wishing she were around to see it.

Of course I am not just talking about the art scene in the city of Washington, where the changes are self-evident and literally right around you. I am talking about the entire country. I won't bore you with any figures today, but the explosion of nonprofit arts institutions over the past 30 years is mind-boggling. There may be more first-rate theater companies in the Washington area right now than there were in the entire nation when I was growing up. From relatively new cultural centers like San Jose to rejuvenated grande dames like Cleveland, there is a huge wealth of energetic, home-grown arts organizations of all shapes, sizes, and aesthetic disciplines. As in the old Washington of my youth, artistic treasures pop up in unlikely corners throughout America—

even if sometimes they lack the wherewithal, unfortunately, to be in plain view. To watch hundreds of ravenous theatergoers drive in some cases hundreds of miles to attend the William Inge Theater Festival in Independence, Kansas—to take just one recent example of my experience—is to realize how determined many Americans are to enjoy the arts, and how dedicated many other Americans are to fill this need.

And yet for all this growth, there's still a sense that something is wrong, that the arts are in tremendous peril in America, and that today's children live in a sea of video games, possess an MTV attention span, and will never learn the difference between Britney Spears and Brahms. There is some truth to this point of view—as there is to most caricatures—but I would argue that the death of culture in America is seriously exaggerated. A country that boasts Paul Taylor—another native Washingtonian, by the way—and John Adams and Joan Didion and Martin Scorsese and August Wilson and Jennifer Bartlett and Maya Lin and Frank Gehry is far from a cultural wasteland. Yet some perils are worthy of concern, and I want to talk today about some of them, and what might be done to counteract them. Let me begin by saying that I am not going to focus on Washington's part in all this. At this point the government's role is highly circumscribed. Much as I support the NEA, the Endowment lacks the money, the clout, and the freedom to have the huge effect on the culture that it once had—when it was not only a bigger fish in real fiscal terms but operating in a smaller pond besides.

The NEA of Nancy Hanks and her immediate successors was operating in a far different country than ours at the



Frank Rich, "Even if the NEA were at 10 times or a 100 times its current budget, it's hard to imagine how it could challenge one of the biggest impediments to the American culture today. That impediment is not the noisy censors of the religious right, and it isn't the limited public resources for culture funding. The biggest threat to the arts instead comes from the private sector—specifically, our mass entertainment media."

dawn of the 21st century. Bill Ivey has said that he wants the NEA to be "as important to America as the department of defense," and while I applaud his goal, an idealistic vision that typifies his strong leadership of this agency, I don't expect this parity to be achieved in my lifetime. And I know Bill is realistic enough that he probably feels the same way—though it shouldn't stop him from dreaming. Indeed that dream is essential for all of you who have come here to fight for the arts. Whatever the measurable result in a budget line, the fight for greater arts support is essential and the good done is immeasurable. It is your hard fight that has kept the NEA from disappearing altogether. And that may lead one day to an America where the arts don't need this kind of advocacy because, as Bill Ivey says, "culture will be as intrinsic to the country's identity and sustenance as a national defense."

In his first budget, as you know, George W. Bush has resisted the urge to do anything dramatic about the arts—having kept the NEA, and for that matter the NEH, appropriations at exactly the same level he inherited. While I, like most of you, would have wished for an increase, and a significant one, I think the political statement he was making with this flat appropriation is important, and not unhelpful. Coming from a political party that has used arts funding as a nasty and divisive ideological whipping boy in recent years, the president is clearly saying that he has no plans to enlist in those culture wars. He's signaling the members of his party in Congress to hold their fire as well. When you think that only a few years ago Lynne Cheney was calling for the complete abolition of both endowments, this is a significant change. I see no reason to believe

that President Bush is more of a culture maven than most of his recent White House predecessors. But I do think the de-scapegoating of the NEA is a shrewd political reading of public sentiment. Witness what happened in my own city of New York just a few weeks ago, when our Mayor found another picture that offended him in the Brooklyn Museum—or at least someone found it and sent him a post card. All the elements were in alignment for a fiery controversy—alleged blasphemy on the part of an outspoken but previously obscure artist, the threat of establishing a governmental

As we begin the 21st century, I think we should spend less time worrying about the demise of culture, and more time worrying about how more Americans can be introduced to the wealth of culture we do have, and at a younger age.

— Frank Rich

decency commission on the part of the Mayor, a publicity-crazed museum director ready to milk the dispute for every last admission and headline it might be worth—but the debate died out almost as soon as it began. We've all been there, done that, and even excitable New Yorkers yawned. If Mayor Giuliani's attempt to spark yet another inflammatory public battle between First Amendment advocates and decency defenders were a Broadway show, it would have closed on opening night.

Now that President Bush has, inadvertently or intentionally, taken this rancorous debate off the table at the federal level—at least for now—we are forced to redirect the energy of our cultural debate—to look elsewhere if we are going to have a serious discussion about the arts and their role in our national life. It's a good time to have that look—a fresh look. For even if the NEA were at ten times or a 100 times its current budget, it's hard to imagine how it could challenge one of the biggest impediments to the American culture today. That impediment is not the noisy censors of the religious right, and it isn't the limited public resources for culture funding. The biggest threat to the arts instead comes from the private sector—specifically, our mass entertainment media.

Don't get me wrong. Entertainment is a vital part of American culture, high and low, and I treasure it. It's in the very nature of our democratic society that commerce mingles with art, and always with both deleterious and advantageous effects. Some of the best

art ever produced in America comes out of Hollywood—even if less so right now, say, than in the 1970's or 30's or teens. (Good things do come in cycles.) The broad entertainment marketplace has yielded goodies from Buster Keaton to Frank Sinatra, from *The Godfather* to *Sweeney Todd*. And it will continue to do so, just as it will continue to give us its traditional quotient of cynical, disposable junk.

But even as that fundamental and eternal ratio between valuable commercial culture and trash remains fixed, there has been a big change in this media world in recent years that radically affects the relationship of the entire commercial culture to non-commercial culture, otherwise known as the high arts. In a very short period of time over the past decade, the many movie, television, publishing, and music companies of the for-profit culture industry have consolidated into a handful of megacompanies of enormous power.

Jack Warner may have been a tyrant in the Warner Bros. of his day, and Bennett Cerf may have been a cultural czar of sorts when he personified Random House, and General Sarnoff may have been the giant of RCA, but none of them could have imagined multi-media conglomerates like AOL Time Warner and Viacom and Bertelsmann, which have swallowed up their old companies and dozens like them.

Nor could any of the old captains of show business have imagined the sheer cultural reach of the new megaplayers. Whatever cultural product one of these companies chooses to put its muscle behind becomes instantly ubiquitous. Whether it's *Survivor* or *Hannibal* or Ricky Martin, you cannot escape the

pitch. In such a marketplace, it's very hard for non-pop culture to be heard at all, let alone compete, especially with the most desirable demographic to whom most products are sold—the young people in whose hands the long future of our culture resides.

What is to be done about this? A number of things, though not necessarily the ones you might think. For instance, it is a favorite tactic of cultural commentators and, need I say it, Washington politicians to decry the worst excesses of the entertainment industry's products. Under this theory, every time there's one less *Temptation Island* or *Natural Born Killers* and one more *Touched by an Angel*, our culture benefits. I don't buy it. I'm all in favor of venting—and certainly I believe that everyone's entitled to be a critic—but I'm not sure what is accomplished when public or cultural figures grab microphones and rail against violent movies, offensive rock lyrics, and salacious TV shows. It was always thus, it will always be thus, and hyperventilating, hypermoralizing adults are likely to make Eminem more popular with all their denunciations, not less—just as similar protests in similar places sped youthful infatuation with, say, the once-controversial Elvis in another day. Publicity is publicity, as long as you spell the names right, and anyone who remembers his own childhood or has kids of his own knows that there is no better claim to coolness in the youth culture than notoriety.

Rather than expend endless energy in taking these companies to task on their money-making content, it might be more worthwhile to shame them about what they don't do—about how little they give back to the higher arts in exchange for their untrammled domination of the mass cultural marketplace.

In TV, for instance, there was a time—in the 1950's and 60's—when the then-dominant networks looked at cultural programming as a public service, like news and reasonably altruistic children's programs, to be bestowed upon the audience in exchange for getting free use of the airwaves to cash in big time in the commercial gold mine of prime time. This meant in practice that a kid of my generation didn't only get *Gunsmoke* and *The Mickey Mouse Club* but Leonard Bernstein's *Young People's Concerts* and Mary Martin in Jerome Robbins's staging of *Peter Pan*. The late, great *Ed Sullivan Show*, on Sunday night, the primest of prime time, was really the ultimate American vaudeville—tossing the latest rock and roll sensation onto a bill that might also include a scene from a Broadway show or a piano recital by Van Cliburn or an aria performed by Rise Stevens. I can tell you as a kid who was watching in those days that even a brief exposure to something higher, sandwiched in between Alan King and Topo Gigio, made a lasting impression.

By today's standards, the cultural offerings on network TV, still the dominant communications medium in America, make Ed Sullivan and his boss at CBS, Bill Paley, look like the Medicis. With all due respect to our host today, even *The Kennedy Center Honors* has been turned into a cheesy, sub-Ed Sullivan TV special that dumbs down the artistic achievements of the yearly recipients. What's more, the news divisions of the networks barely cover culture as if it were a major part of American life and American communities, which it is—more so in the post-Cold War era, arguably, than even the workings of the Defense Department. Real culture seems to make broadcast news only on breakfast shows, or if someone like Rudolph Giuliani is shouting, or some otherwise obscure artist is baiting him to do so, or some cultural figure dies or wins an award or has a huge payday or gets caught in a sex scandal.

And things scarcely look more promising in the new mass medium of the Internet. Internet billionaires—or perhaps I should say former billionaires—are now belatedly bestowing philanthropy on cultural institutions. But that doesn't let them off the hook. It remains to be seen if there will be any more room for true cultural discourse in, say, the coming broadband of AOL Time Warner than there is in the broadcast networks.

Such shortchanging of the arts in our mass media venues isn't right and it's not fair. Our entertainment corporations not only enjoy increasingly unlimited access to our homes and airwaves but routinely raid our nonprofit arts institutions to further their own bottom lines. Look at the credits of any dramatic TV series, or at the executive ranks of any entertainment megacorporation, and chances are you'll find a who's who of the nonprofit performing-arts community of a few years earlier.

While it's long been a tradition of Hollywood to lure actors, writers, and directors from the East, it's a relatively recent development that the brain drain now extends to America's artistic directors and culture institution management. There's nothing wrong with this per se, but you'd think some of these companies doing the raiding might want to give back—not just in terms of what they may hand out in the way of donations to cultural institutions, but in terms of how they respect, acknowledge, and further America's arts in the many cultural spaces they rule.

Last year, I couldn't help notice, the Nancy Hanks lecture was given by a Hollywood executive who described himself as an avid art collector. Well, I'm here to tell you that every executive in Hollywood is an avid art collector, or can be, as long as he or she has a checkbook. That's not a good enough contribution to our culture from those who take so much from it in talent and who so frequently try to crowd the arts out of the country's cultural conversation.

Many of those entertainment industry executives who double as art collectors also sit on the boards of most of America's major cultural organizations and institutions—including many represented here today. Instead of just taking their money and running, maybe it's time for the leaders of our cultural organizations to join journalists like me and even the occasional bold politician in shaming the moguls—in calling attention to how frequently their corporations fail to support American arts with anything other than high-minded lip service and yearly checks. When the NEA was fighting for its life in the Gingrich years, the leaders of these entertainment companies, with a tiny handful of exceptions, were barely heard from in Washington; it's typical of how little involved they are in the life of our non-commercial culture in general. It's time that they became engaged, responsible citizens—that they give back more of what they take. Corporate responsibility towards culture cannot begin and end with giving at the office or shopping for trophy paintings at Christie's. Desperately needed are more leaders like Michael Greene, who actually made the ultimate sacrifice of using valuable prime time, on the Grammy Awards show, to campaign for the arts. The same sacrifice is needed from our on-screen entertainers—many of whom began their careers on the non-profit stage. For every Chris Reeve or Baldwin brother who has worked tirelessly for the arts in America, there are at least another dozen stars, often of greater magnitude, who have remained shamefully silent. In a country driven by entertainment, these people could be real cultural leaders if they chose to be.

At the local level, our media companies, large and small, should also be shamed into giving more to arts in America than a financial donation or a public service spot aired in some Nielsen twilight

zone. The tuning out of our culture by broadcast media at the local level is just as scandalous as it is at the national level. When I began as a drama critic in the early 1980's, every local TV station in New York reviewed every Broadway play on the 11 o'clock news and some Off Broadway plays as well. Now no broadcast channels do. And we're talking about New York—the cultural capital of the country, and one where the arts, the high arts included, are a significant part of the local economic base.

The National Arts Journalism Program, in its recent survey, found that, with the exception of a few national papers like *The New York Times*, newspaper coverage of the arts is also largely dismal throughout the United States. Most of what passes for arts coverage in daily papers is syndicated gossip, mechanized listings, recitations of movie grosses and TV ratings, airheaded features by freelancers, and TV news you can use (or can't).

If nonprofit cultural institutions are going to have some chance of getting their message out to new audiences at a time when megamedia companies dominate and drive more and more of the culture, especially that which reaches young people, surely they need the help of local newspapers and broadcasters. It's time for cultural leaders in American communities to complain about the paucity and inadequacy of their coverage to local editors, publishers, and station managers. By this, I don't mean petty complaints—say, griping about a negative review or the inaccuracies in one particular story—but big picture complaints. If noncultural local industries, political institutions, and schools can speak up when they feel they're being short-changed by their local news media, so

The goal [attracting a younger audience] means a different kind of fight than the arts community has been used to in recent years—a fight with the mass media, not censorious zealots, indeed a fight with our cultured friends, not the usual rogue’s gallery for philistine enemies.

— Frank Rich

can the local symphony, museum, and theater company. Ideally, the local arts institutions should band together and pool their views so they can speak clearly and as one about what’s missing to their local news media. And the complaints should not be vague but backed up by actual data. How many column inches or broadcast time is devoted to the arts as compared to other sectors? Are those amounts in proportion to what the arts contribute to the community—both in terms of actual dollars and incalculable benefits? Presented in this way, the complaints will not seem like special pleading but community-wide concern. The arts should not accept second-class media citizenship behind any other local sector—sports included. If cultural leaders were to be more assertive in asking for their fair and proper treatment in the media environment, they might actually get some results. The leaders of media companies, national and local, big and small, often hunger for the prestige and cachet of being associated with the higher arts; they want to be seen as cultural figures in the country or their communities; they don’t want to be looked upon as vulgarians. In other

words, there are some cards for cultural leaders to play against them in the game of shame. Unfortunately, too many of our cultural leaders today are cowed by these media moguls. It’s easier to decry or confront Jesse Helms or Donald Wildmon than it is ostensibly arts-loving executives, whether Democrat or Republican.

Worse, more and more cultural institutions are trying to emulate the ways of entertainment companies rather than trying to challenge them. While we’re past the point where we can or should upbraid museums for merchandizing schemes and advertising campaigns, which in some sad way may be essential to their survival, it’s defeating for cultural institutions to compromise their core mission, the presentation of culture itself, in the interest of mercantile self-promotion. But too often that’s what’s happening. Whether it’s the nonprofit theater that is turning away a serious play to produce some cynical musical that might (but probably won’t) have a crack at Broadway, or the orchestra that refuses ever to challenge its audience in its repertory, the results are inevitably stultifying and self-defeating. And, as many have noted of late, it’s hard to see just what is the point of museums staging shows in which the cultural content is secondary, if not non-existent.

At the center of much of this controversy of late has been New York’s Guggenheim. I find some of the anti-Guggenheim rhetoric off-base. There is nothing wrong, in my view, with the museum setting up its shop in Las Vegas. Art in America has always gone chasing after its audience where it can find it; this has always been the way America works. We have always been the crazy-quilt land of *The Ed Sullivan Show*. As Lawrence Levine documents in his study of the growth of American culture, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, Shakespeare has rarely been more prolifically produced in America than he was during the gold rush, when local versions of his plays were as much a fixture of the mining towns as whore houses and saloons. Las Vegas happens to be one of the fastest growing communities in the country, and why shouldn’t its citizens and visitors have the cultural opportunities a museum brings?

On the other hand, a Guggenheim show in New York devoted to Armani, staged at the same time as a major Armani financial contribution was given to the institution, and sponsored synergistically by *In Style* magazine, is a ridiculous dereliction of a museum’s duty. If I were Mayor of New York, I’d find this use of a museum far more offensive than the Brooklyn Museum’s *Sensation* show—which, while largely forgettable, did at least have art in it, a small percentage of which was actually worth seeing.

But let’s not pick on the Guggenheim. Few museums can afford to be holier-than-thou these days. The highminded blockbuster art show, a fixture at so many museums, including those in

Washington, increasingly seems like high culture's answer to a stale Hollywood sequel. As the French impressionists are trotted out again and again under mindless guises, they might as well be fading action stars like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger forced to suit up for yet another mechanical action movie. *The Economist* magazine described the declining dynamics of blockbuster shows best, and most succinctly, a few months ago: "Masterpieces are shunted around the world, often against the advice of conservation departments, primarily to bring prestige to the lenders, publicity to the sponsors, and paying customers to the host institutions."

I would add that what is lost in this deadening process is the active engagement of a viewer with an art work—especially young viewers, who do have to be engaged if the high arts are to compete with all the electronic rivals for their attention. Kids aren't stupid. They know when they're being patronized. If a blockbuster show doesn't engage adults at a serious level, it won't engage younger viewers either. And when museums try to pander to the young by dumbing down, or appropriating their culture, teenagers see through it. I know the *Star Wars* show at the Smithsonian was a box office hit, as it was at the Field Museum in Chicago and will be at the Brooklyn Museum—but does any smart American kid believe it's better than a DVD of the actual movie? Who are we kidding? Parents may be able to corral the young into a museum for these shows, but there is no relationship established in this transaction between museum and youthful patron that will bring that child back for an authentic cultural experience in years to come. That kid is more likely to think a museum is a place where you can get a painless *Star Wars* fix and humor your parents into thinking that you're into museums and "art."

In the end, the future of the high arts in this country is going to depend on our ability to engage their future audiences, and those audiences are indeed far smarter than cultural barons, or their parents for that matter, often give them credit for. I am frequently asked by parents what play they should take their child to see in New York, and I always give them the same answer: take them to something you would like to see yourself. A six-year-old child will certainly not understand all, or maybe even much, of Shakespeare's language, but if it's a decent production, the child will feel it in his or her bones. The same is true of any artistic experience. Trust a kid to get something out of a modern dance piece, not just *The Nutcracker*—to find something in Jackson Pollock, not just Monet.

This point was brought home to me in the past few months as I took part in the Open Doors program started by my friend Wendy Wasserstein through the Theater Development Fund in New York.

The idea of this program is to expose high-school students in New York to the theater that is right in their midst but which many of them have not experienced. Every few weeks my wife and I go with a group of eight teenagers to a play of our choosing, then spend 90 minutes or so talking about it with them afterwards. In our case, the students go to a city-wide public school for kids who test poorly. Most of them have never been to a play before, or at least a professional production of one, and some of them, though living in New York City, have never even been in the vicinity of Times Square.

I guess we could have taken them directly to *Stomp* or *Phantom of the Opera* or some other long-running Broadway spectacle, and no one would have complained. Instead, we opted for *Proof*, a four-character play by a new young dramatist that plays tricks with time and memory. Our teenagers weren't thrown a bit. Once they got over their shock about how white and old the audience around them was, they weren't at all intimidated by what they saw, and had perceptions that were as incisive as any drama critic's and tougher than most.

Listening to these students, I was taken back to my own earliest exposure to the arts, the theater especially, back in the Washington of the 50's and 60's. Like me, they came to the theater with a whole set of expectations, a lot of questions, and a deep sense of wonder. They explained in great detail how long it took them to adjust to the conventions of stage acting, so different from what they're used to on the various screens of their usual cultural life. And then they were hooked—by the whole idea of theater: In the case of *Proof*, they were delighted to discover a

simple joy such as the convention that Act I can end with a blackout, just after a single shocking line of dialogue has upended the entire dynamic of the play up to that point.

In all of this, they reminded me of me, when I was first discovering the theater as a child. But it was my good fortune, because of my parents and my relatively privileged economic circumstances, that I experienced these sensations when I was seven; they had to wait until they were around ten years older, even though they, unlike me, lived in a cultural center, not a backwater.

This is unjust. I am not remotely worried that there will ever be a short supply of good and sometimes even great artists in this country; they just keep coming, no matter what our society does to discourage them or to make their lives difficult. Artists just happen; they are, if you will, God-given. Audiences, however, have to be created, and what's amazing, and what we tend to forget, is that they can be created so easily. I was turned into an audience member at the National Theater in Washington when I was seven because my parents took me to see *Damn Yankees*, a show they'd thought I'd like because it was about my beloved home baseball team, the Washington Senators. The teenagers going to the theater with me were hooked because in this case a nonprofit organization, the Theater Development Fund, enlisted the help of commercial producers to expose students to a form of art that is not along their beaten path and whose cost of admission is prohibitively expensive.

Will these students stop watching lousy movies, listening to empty music or trancing out to mediocre TV? Of course not. I might add that I didn't stop



Representatives of the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation, one of the sponsors of the 14th Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture, were on hand to congratulate Frank Rich following his presentation. (L—R): Jamie Rosenthal Wolf, Joni Maya Cherbo, Nancy Stephens Rosenthal, Bob Lynch, and Frank Rich.

doing any of those things either when I discovered the theater as a child. But every one of these students is potentially an audience not only for good theater, but for the other arts.

We all know that arts education is in a sorry state in this country, and we all fight for its reinstatement in those school systems where it has been regarded as the most dispensable budgetary item in the curriculum. But with or without arts education, we must have arts exposure. Parents should do their part, but often don't—affluent parents included. Without a large-scale effort to get kids access to the arts—whether through government programs or privately funded ones or both—it just won't happen. And as part of this effort, and once again, we must pressure the powerful for-profit entertainment industry to ante up. If they're not going to put ballet on television, or recreate the NBC Symphony Orchestra—and I dare say they are not, unless castaways from *Survivor* are among the soloists—then they are going to have to help enable the nation's children to see America's arts first-hand. They're going to have to help provide the cultural nutrients to counter the cultural junk food they largely dish out.

Broadway's commercial theater is now more actively involved in New York's schools than it's ever been—and in part out of self-interest; if the commercial theater can't generate a new audience, it will be driven out of the Times Square district by market forces. In truth, the big entertainment companies in the movie and TV and music and Internet business don't have this problem; they don't have to generate new audiences for the arts to ensure their own survival. But again, as public citizens, they should do so—and it's time for us to call on them to pick up far more of this burden than they currently do. Right now, all corporations only contribute just under five percent of the funding for nonprofit arts—that's less than half what government does, even in today's often tight arts-funding budgets.

The main point of exposing new generations to the best of American art is not, however, to assure a future for our existing arts institutions—or because it's somehow morally right to do so. The calling is greater than that.

The arts have many rewards, concrete and not: in my case, the discovery of theater as a child helped me overcome a somewhat stormy childhood, and I know from the mail I've been receiving reacting to my recent memoir telling that story, it is hardly an uncommon tale. At the civic level, as we all know, the arts can generate direct, practical rewards—tourism, spin-off income for surrounding businesses, a selling point to corporations that might be tempted to move into the community.

Yet the calling is greater too than the solipsism of personal salvation and the civic good of urban improvement.

At this moment, this country is more Balkanized than ever. We've become a nation of niche markets, it seems at times, sharing a political system and little else.

But at the national level the arts can bind us together in a way that perhaps no other glue can—not government and not our myriad of religions, and not even entertainment—which is also now Balkanized by demographics. By contrast, the lasting, humane values that inform all the arts—the beauty and catharses that lift us well above the quotidian reality of our lives—are beyond category. They carry over from art form to art form, from generation to generation, from society to society. They speak in a language that once understood is never forgotten. It's a language that, like any other language, is most easily learned in childhood. It seems to me a crime that in a country as rich as ours we don't teach it automatically to every child we have.

As we begin the 21st century, I think we should spend less time worrying about the demise of culture, and more time worrying about how more Americans can be introduced to the wealth of culture we do have, and at a younger age, especially at a time

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when the commercial culture blasted out by the mass media is more rapacious than ever in pursuit of us, our children, and our leisure hours. State and local arts agencies can play an enormous role in this, but it also must be a national mission. At that national level, this goal means a different kind of fight than the arts community has been used to in recent years—a fight with the mass media, not censorious zealots, indeed a fight with our cultured friends, not the usual rogue's gallery of philistine enemies. It's an idealistic fight that, if won, will not only benefit the arts community but the nation as a whole, and that can be won, with but also without government help. I look forward to seeing you all at the barricades.

Thank you.

Past Nancy Hanks Lectures:

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1999	Wendy Wasserstein, <i>playwright</i>
1998	Dr. Billy Taylor, <i>jazz musician and educator</i>
1997	Alan K. Simpson, <i>former U.S. senator</i>
1996	Carlos Fuentes, <i>author</i>
1995	Winton Malcolm Blount, <i>chairman of Blount, Inc., philanthropist, former U.S. postmaster general</i>
1994	David McCullough, <i>historian</i>
1993	Barbara Jordan, <i>former U.S. congresswoman</i>
1992	Franklin D. Murphy, <i>former chief executive officer of the Times Mirror Company</i>
1991	John Brademas, <i>former congressman, president emeritus of New York University</i>
1990	Maya Angelou, <i>poet</i>
1989	Leonard Garment, <i>special counsel to Presidents Nixon and Ford</i>
1988	Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., <i>historian</i>

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