

NEA ARTS

NUMBER 1 2012

MAKING AN IMPACT

Tracing the Journeys
of Past NEA Grantees



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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Over more than 45 years, the National Endowment for the Arts has awarded nearly 140,000 grants to artists and arts organizations nationwide. We can give you many statistics about NEA-supported projects: how many people were in the audience, how many kids participated in an arts class, how many artists presented during a festival. Something we can't quite measure, however, is how any one individual is impacted by an NEA-supported project. Take, for instance, an anecdote related by Steppenwolf Theatre Company Executive Director (and former NEA Director) David Hawkanson about company co-founder Gary Sinise: "Gary Sinise as a young high school student around 1973 was taken up to Minneapolis to see this production of *Of Mice and Men* [at the Guthrie Theatre]. That production...was underwritten by a special grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.... Gary will often say that that production is what inspired him to want to create his own company and to be a theater artist for the rest of his life." Steppenwolf, of course, is now an internationally lauded theater powerhouse, regularly receiving NEA support since 1984 for work that's inspiring and impacting a new generation of theater artists and audiences.

And that's what we're looking at in this issue: impact. The artists and organizations profiled in this issue all received our funding at critical points in their development, support that ultimately magnified the reach of their art. From poet Nikki Giovanni and dancer-choreographer Mark Morris to the Mississippi Arts Commission, the city of Lowell, Massachusetts, and, of course, Steppenwolf, we're taking a look back at where they were and asking—where are they now?

Don't forget to visit our Art Works blog on our website to comment on this issue or to share information on arts in your community, and join us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/NationalEndowmentfortheArts) and Twitter (@NEArts).

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Petrichor by choreographer Mark Morris, who received his first NEA grant in 1983.

PHOTO BY BRIAN SNYDER

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WHAT'S GOING ON?

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WORDS WITH NIKKI GIOVANNI



PHOTO COURTESY OF NIKKI GIOVANNI

According to Nikki Giovanni—poet, activist, professor, Grammy nominee—Columbia University owes her a degree. As Giovanni related, “I was at Columbia University in an MFA program, and the object there was you did two years of school and you had to have a publishable book.”

THE 100 BEST

*BUT I CHEATED

American

AMERICAN



POEMS

EDITED BY

Nikki Giovanni





So Giovanni wrote and self-published her first collection, *Black Feeling, Black Talk* in her first year of the program. “I thought, ‘Well, then if I publish this book, I’ll get my MFA and, you know, go on about my business.’” Columbia, however, took issue with Giovanni’s accelerated timetable. “They were like, ‘Miss Giovanni, you don’t understand—this is a two-year program,’” she remembered. “[And I said,] ‘No, no, this is a program for me to publish a book.’” So Giovanni left the university with a book but without a master’s degree.

Giovanni laughed retelling this story, a tale that underscores her drive, tenacity, and outright gump-tion. That willingness to go her own way has led not just to an enduring literary career, but also a slew of honorary doctorates and civic, industry, and cultural awards. In 2009, HarperCollins published Giovanni’s 17th poetry collection, *Bicycle: Love Poems*, which was praised by *Booklist* as “disarming, sly, sensual, and knowing.” While the poet’s voice may now be tempered with the sadness of many losses, including losing her mother and sister to lung cancer—which Giovanni herself has battled—the poet who in 1968 wrote “I wanted to write/a poem/that rhymes/but revolution doesn’t lend/ itself to be-bopping” still has plenty to say.

According to Giovanni, she absorbed her vocation from her native ground. “I’m a Tennessean by birth, and I’m an eastern Tennessean. If I had been born in Memphis I probably would have been a blues singer. But in Knoxville, Tennessee, we mostly are storytellers.” As a child she heard stories on front porches, at church, and, most important, at the salon where she waited on Saturdays for her hair to be washed and pressed in between adult appointments. “I would just sit there, and I’d sit quietly, and pretty soon they’d forget about me, and I would hear a lot of really interesting things,” Giovanni recalled. “So I got in the habit of [thinking], ‘Oh I wonder what the story really is.’ I would not have formed that question at that time, but ultimately that’s what I came to as I became aware of literature and stuff. You start to say to yourself, ‘I wonder whose story this is. I wonder what’s really going on here.’”

“Basically I’m always walking around with a question in my head, whether or not I actually sit down [to write],” she explained. “Sometimes an image [starts a poem] but it’s usually a question. I’m a ‘What if?’ person. So you start to see things, and you wonder about them.”

While her poetry may have traditional roots, Giovanni’s career has been decidedly forward-thinking. She was making recordings such as 1971’s *Truth is On Its Way* long before spoken word became a phenomenon. Self-publishing was also not the norm in 1968 when Giovanni published the collection she’d polished at Columbia. “I found a printer in Pennsylvania, and he [said], ‘Okay, I can give you 500 books for \$500.’ So I borrowed some money from my grandmother and some other friends and bought 500 books.... Well, you have to take them around, which I did, to the coffee houses and stuff,” remembered the poet.

She took to the airwaves to publicize her second book, *Black Judgement*, which was supported by an NEA Discovery grant. (A short-lived program, these awards were given to artists based on financial need as well as artistic merit.) Giovanni recalled thinking, “I am gonna make sure the people who might want this book know it exists.... AM radio was ruling the roost, and so I just went down to the radio shows and was like, ‘Hi, would you like to have some poetry read?’ I don’t want to be falsely humble but I think that this career has been helpful to the poetry movement because I would do things like that, and when people would say, ‘Well, Nikki did it,’ people would start doing it, and I think it raised the poetry profile in the non-traditional community.”

Giovanni’s work was heavily influenced by Langston Hughes, especially his remark, “We will write about our own black selves.” She explained, “That was the right thing to do. What else are you going to write about? Can you really see me doing a British novel about fox hunting in the highlands, or for that matter, a poem? That is stupid. You write about what you know.... [W]e argue from the particular to the universal, not the other way around. That only makes sense.”





Still, while Giovanni's work focused on African-American subjects, she was uneasy with the question of an African-American aesthetic, an idea with which she still grapples. "I didn't understand, because nobody ever talked about the white aesthetic or the brown aesthetic.... [T]hese things never came up with the Asian-American aesthetic. It still confuses me. I wrote and I write and I try to write what I understand and what I love, like any other writer, and I think of that as an incredibly inclusive process."

This is a philosophy that Giovanni endeavors to pass on to her students at conferences and workshops and at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, where she has been on faculty—and a fervent Hokies fan—since 1987. For Giovanni, teaching is a two-way street benefiting the teacher as much as the student. "Everybody that I do know—and that'd be from Toni Morrison to Maya Angelou—all teach because it keeps you young.... It puts you in essentially what's an uncomfortable situation, which requires that instead of [contemplation] you have to project. This is incredibly good for you if you're a writer because writing is a solitary profession, and if you're not careful you'll end up in that Ernest Hemingway mode."

While age has grayed her hair and she has been known to refer to herself as a "little old lady," Giovanni remains as outspoken as ever, even sporting a controversial "Thug Life" tattoo inked to honor the late rapper Tupac Shakur. And she's not afraid to make statements that might make others uncomfortable, such as linking the deaths of Shakur and John F. Kennedy, Jr. "When you compare—I shouldn't say 'compare' but 'pair'—the deaths of John Kennedy, Jr. and Tupac, America lost two of its really wonderful sons that were going to be able to—or we had hoped—begin to take the nation in another direction in terms of how we feel, how we look at ourselves. And so I think those are two great losses."

A frequent guest speaker—even at Columbia University—Giovanni still possesses that rare gift of saying the exact thing that needs saying even under the most difficult circumstances. The same unfussy

plainspeak that powered early poems such as the love poem, "Kidnap Poem," and the brief but powerful elegy, "The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr." permeates work addressing the questions the poet ponders today. How do you talk about being in love as a senior citizen? How do you put words around the legacy of the civil rights movement? Hers was the voice that articulated the collective grief and hope for healing of the Virginia Tech University community after the 2007 campus shooting. Her poem "We are Virginia Tech," reads, "We are strong enough to stand tall tearlessly, we are brave enough to bend to cry, and we are sad enough to know that we must laugh again."

And, of course, sometimes it still behooves Giovanni to play by her own rules when it comes to publishing, especially if it's in the service of promoting others. Take for instance 2010's *The 100 Best African American Poems* published by Sourcebooks. A quick glance at the table of contents reveals that the anthology actually contains 115 poems. Giovanni explained, "I definitely cheated because I wanted one-fourth of the book to be young people. And I said to my publisher, 'If a church doesn't have Sunday school, pretty soon there won't be church.' And so devoting a significant portion of that book to young writers, I think, was important."

Asked to identify the most significant moments of her career, Giovanni quipped, "I don't do retrospective right now. I'm just 68!" There is, however, a thread that clearly connects Giovanni's past and present career: she sees her work—as writer, as teacher, as advocate—as a form of citizenship. "[Writers] are like anybody else. We're like the teacher, the preacher. We're like the restaurant owner," she affirmed. "We're citizens and sometimes people let writers think that they should be more.... 'If you're a good writer, why don't you change the world?' Well, writers don't change the world. The world changes and we write about it."

"We're like a really good mom-and-pop restaurant," she added. "[O]ur job is for that little restaurant to do the best food we can do so that when people do come, they are fulfilled." ▲



Building on the Past

The Creative Rebirth of Lowell, Massachusetts

BY REBECCA GROSS

Boott Cotton Mills is a historic mill that has been turned into a museum and multiple-use space in Lowell, Massachusetts. PHOTO BY JONATHAN PARKER

Lowell, Massachusetts, has long passed its 19th-century heyday as the largest planned industrial center in the United States. Although the city once roared with 10,000 looms, the local economy collapsed once cotton manufacturing began to migrate south in the 1920s. The looms grew still, the mills were abandoned, and the following decades were marked by widespread urban decay.

The Worcester Kiltie Pipe Band performs during the annual Lowell Folk Festival.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LOWELL FOLK FESTIVAL/HIGGINS & ROSS

In 1976, the population had dipped from six figures to 92,000, and unemployment reached 13 percent, the highest of any city in Massachusetts. Being the birthplace of Jack Kerouac and James Whistler meant little when faced with those statistics.

“If you were away in college and somebody asked where you were from, you would say ‘North of Boston,’” said Rosemary Noon, a Lowell native who grew up in the 1960s and ‘70s. “You would never say that you were from Lowell because it had, at that point, a troubling reputation and nothing optimistic about it.” Noon went on to dedicate her career to revamping this reputation. In 1988, she became Lowell’s first director of cultural affairs, and is today the assistant director of Lowell Plan, Inc., a not-for-profit that facilitates local development by fostering public-private partnerships.

Noon points to the creation of the Lowell National Historical Park as a pivotal moment in the city’s story. Rather than follow the conventional raze-and-rebuild notion of urban renewal, the park would celebrate and preserve Lowell’s history as an industrial powerhouse. Among the earliest funding for this nascent project was a \$30,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1974. This seed money helped spark a multi-decade effort to restore the 5.6-mile canal system that once powered the city’s mills. Four years later, Patrick Mogan, then the city’s superintendent of schools, successfully completed the campaign to secure an additional \$40 million in federal funding to create one of the nation’s first urban national parks. It was Mogan, along with U.S. Senator Paul Tsongas, a Lowell native, whom Noon remembers as the first to consider Lowell’s history an asset rather than a source of embarrassment.

Paul Marion, who is married to Noon, is another Lowellian who has dedicated his life to championing his

hometown. Today the executive director of Community and Cultural Affairs at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, Marion began his service to the city in 1981 when he joined the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission. His role was to help implement cultural programming in the new national park. “It was a terrific opportunity to spark a kind of cultural renaissance in the city,” Marion said. The Park and Preservation District became a focal point for performances and cultural entities, many of which the commission supported. One of the earliest projects was to convert a historic mill complex into artist studios, inspired by the Torpedo Factory in Alexandria, Virginia.

Marion said that the success of these early projects in turn helped catalyze additional investment resources for the city. By the late ‘80s, “The city was starting to look very different and taking on a much more dynamic, energetic personality,” Marion said. “People saw that there was a foundation for going even further.” The Merrimack Repertory Theatre—a frequent NEA grant recipient—opened in 1979, and historic buildings continued to be rehabbed. The New England Quilt Museum opened in 1987; the Department of Cultural Affairs was founded in 1988; and in 1989, an 1844 boardinghouse, once home to female mill workers, was converted into the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center.

“It’s a heritage of innovation,” said Marion, explaining the city’s predisposition to reinvention. “Lowell was famous in the 1820s because it was the place where something happened first. It’s that attitude that needs to drive the city forward. And that’s why creative economy is such a good fit, because it’s about invention, imagination, innovation.”

Although Lowell was beginning to gain recognition as a regional wunderkind, it was the National



Artists themselves are considered entrepreneurs, and the city has created an infrastructure to support the hundreds of artists who now reside in Lowell.

Folk Festival that transformed Lowell into a national destination overnight. After a concerted effort by local leaders, the itinerant National Folk Festival—which partners with communities across the country for three-year stints as festival host—chose Lowell as its host from 1987 to 1989. The event was such a success that once the city’s hosting period ended, the Lowell Folk Festival was launched in 1990, with Marion serving as one of its founders. Today, the annual three-day festival is the largest free celebration of its kind, and attracts roughly 250,000 people every year. It has received continued support from the Arts Endowment since its inception.

Marion said the city’s NEA grants, and the National Folk Festival in general, “were a kind of outside validation that what was going on here was significant and had national status. Those decisions made a difference in terms of the community psychology.”

Community psychology, however, was dealt another major blow in the 1990s when computer company Wang Laboratories, then headquartered in Lowell, closed its doors, sparking another wave of unemployment and economic hardship. Once again, the arts helped the city recalibrate itself, and the idea of “creative economy” began to find a larger audience.

“When I was the first cultural affairs director, the emphasis was on culture as an amenity—an important one, and a very serious one—but definitely an amenity,” Noon said. “It was never discussed as an economic engine.”

Today, of course, that viewpoint has shifted entirely, and Lowell has redeveloped itself as a regional cultural capital. Nearly 80 percent of the historic mills have been rehabilitated, many of them into live/work spaces for artists. The one million dollar Lowell Public Art Collection, partially funded with NEA grants, uses contemporary artistry to honor the city’s history as a

mill town. Those formerly underutilized and underappreciated canals now form the picturesque Canalway and Riverwalk system, popular spots for boat rides, bike rides, and afternoon strolls. There are year-round festivals, and no lack of art galleries or museums. The city’s diverse ethnic communities flavor Lowell with artistic multiculturalism, with organizations such as the Angkor Dance Troupe, the African Festival, and the Khmer Cultural Institute.

Artists themselves are considered entrepreneurs, and the city has created an infrastructure to support the hundreds of artists who now reside in Lowell. There are networking events for creative professionals, community panels tailored to expanding creative businesses, and business and funding assistance for cultural entrepreneurs. In 2007, the Lowell Plan commissioned a report on creative economy called *On the Cultural Road*, which outlines strategies that will help Lowell continue to evolve as a dynamic cultural destination.

And evolve Lowell has—many new projects are underway. The Hamilton Canal District initiative will revamp 15 acres of Lowell, and there is a new effort to incorporate the historic trolley line into the city’s mass transit system. But it remains to be seen who will be the next James Whistler or Jack Kerouac, or who will fight as passionately for Lowell as Paul Marion and Rosemary Noon have. “The challenge is to make sure that the people who are in their 30s don’t take this stuff for granted,” Noon said. “You must get involved in your city. You can’t just sit back.” ▲



The Worker, a part of the Lowell Public Art Collection, which commissions contemporary artists to honor the city's history as a mill town.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK/HIGGINS & ROSS



Filling Their Souls

A Sense of Home with the Steppenwolf Theatre Company

1974
BY PAULETTE BEETE

In 1974, a plucky group of young actors in suburban Illinois who rehearsed in a borrowed church basement decided, “Hey, let’s start a theater company!” What may sound like the premise of a new TV show along the lines of *Smash* and *Glee* is, actually, a true story—starring Gary Sinise, Jeff Perry, and Terry Kinney as the plucky young actors. The theater they founded in that basement? Chicago’s Tony Award-winning Steppenwolf Theatre Company (with a name borrowed from the Herman Hesse novel for no particular reason at all). The theater, which received the National Medal of Arts in 1998, is heading toward its 40th birthday, which is not bad considering that neither Sinise, Perry, nor Kinney knew that what they were incubating would become one of the most highly revered theaters in the world. In fact, according to Perry, they “had no other particular skill set” and were just doing what they loved. He added, “I don’t remember thinking more than a week ahead...I don’t think any of us did. I think we only thought to the next opening of the show.”

Steppenwolf Theatre Company members, circa 1980: (clockwise from top) John Malkovich, Francis Guinan, Moira Harris, Jeff Perry, Gary Sinise, Laurie Metcalf, Rondi Reed, Alan Wilder, Terry Kinney, Joan Allen, John Mahoney, Tom Irwin, and former theater company member Glenne Headly.

PHOTO COURTESY OF STEPPENWOLF THEATRE COMPANY

The initial trio of Sinise, Perry, and Kinney quickly expanded to include John Malkovich, Laurie Metcalf, and several others, all but two of whom are still with Steppenwolf. The troupe became known for challenging, gritty work with early productions such as Harold Pinter’s *The Lover*, Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*, and Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty*. In its early years, Steppenwolf also inaugurated its tradition of premiering new plays. In 1978 Dan Ursini became the group’s first resident playwright; his play *Quiet Jeannie Green* premiered the next season with ensemble member Joan Allen in the title role.

Even as the theater rose in acclaim, the process for joining the ensemble remained the same. Current ensemble members recommended people whose work they’d admired or who they’d worked with. If everyone agreed, an invitation was issued. As it grew, Steppenwolf hopped from the suburbs into Chicago proper, arriving at its current home in the city’s Lincoln Park neighborhood in 1982. That same year Broadway came calling, and Sinise, Malkovich, Metcalf, and Francis Guinan took on audiences at New York’s Cherry Lane Theatre in a production of Sam Shepard’s *True West*, directed by Sinise. (The original Chicago version featured Perry onstage instead of Sinise.) Perry remembered that the show wasn’t officially billed as a “Steppenwolf” production. But given the theater company’s prominence on the cast’s resumes it received the credit just the same, and a national reputation was born.

After its Broadway run, the cast returned to Chicago and to Steppenwolf. This commitment to



Laurie Metcalf and John Malkovich in *True West* by Sam Shepard, directed by Gary Sinise.

PHOTO BY LISA EBRIGHT

the ensemble model and to each other remains a hallmark of the company, which now comprises 43 artists, including actors, playwrights, and directors. The sheer depth of talent in the members is staggering; the ensemble counts numerous Tony Awards (including a 1985 Tony for Regional Theater Excellence), Pulitzer Prizes, and other awards among its many honors. Some members—such as Allen, Metcalf, Malkovich, and Sinise—have become household names from their work in TV and film. Others have made names for themselves primarily on the stage, such as playwrights Tarell Alvin McCraney and Tracy Letts, and directors Frank Galati and Anna D. Shapiro. What they all have in common, according to McCraney,

who joined the ensemble in 2010, is a deep desire for a place to call home.

“The life of an artist solely in the theater—you might be able to make a living, but you certainly won’t make a killing, as they say. So actors have to go off, and writers have to go off, and directors have to go off and find other ways to support themselves,” McCraney commented. “But the great thing about Steppenwolf is that you keep coming back to do quality work and I think that’s one of the major reasons people keep coming back. They can do quality work and fill their soul and then be aglow, be awash for awhile as you have to do other things that you may not love so much.”

Steppenwolf’s current artistic director, Martha Lavey, joined the ensemble as an actor in 1993, becoming the company’s artistic director two years later. Lavey explained that the ensemble is about more than being a name on the list; the members really are the engine that drives which projects Steppenwolf takes on. “Season planning is a two-way conversation between the artistic office and the ensemble, and I’m a pivot point for that,” she said. For example, Galati, who worked on the Broadway adaptation of E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, became interested in Doctorow’s *The March*. He brought the idea to Lavey, they eventually obtained the rights to the work, and the show is part of this year’s mainstage season.

Steppenwolf, like many of its peers, is taking a hard look at how it interacts with its community as well. “In those early days they were thinking about what they wanted to do artistically, what served them individually as artists, and what the life and character of the ensemble was,” said Lavey, who employed the metaphor of a conversation to trace the evolution of Steppenwolf’s relationship with its audience. If the theater’s early years were a conversation among

artists, today the conversation is a two-way dialogue between Steppenwolf and its community.

The Young Adults Council is one testament to Steppenwolf’s new approach to community engagement. Founded in 2007, the council—one of numerous Steppenwolf outreach programs targeted to diverse populations—is a leadership education program comprising roughly 30 teens from across the Chicago metro area. The high-schoolers must pass muster on an essay-based application before joining the select group that meets once a week for nine months to learn the ins and outs of professional theater from the ensemble and other local theater artists. For McCraney, the Young Adults Council is one of Steppenwolf’s most impressive features. “Those young people are amazing,” he enthused. “They’re diverse, they’re energetic, they’re intelligent, they’re active.... You look at them and think, ‘Oh, they’ll be running this place in about ten years.’ And it’s encouraging [and] exciting.”

In 2010, Steppenwolf—mindful of its own roots in that church basement—debuted its Garage Rep program, which invites what its website calls “Chicago storefront theaters” to take up a repertory-style residency in one of the theater’s smaller spaces. While Steppenwolf had early on established a tradition of hosting visiting companies, Lavey—with a grant in hand from the Doris Duke Foundation—felt the theater needed to make it easier for emerging companies to participate. “I was looking at the model for a visiting company, and I thought, ‘You know, the financial imperative for the visiting company, it still requires a certain amount of institutional infrastructure for companies to come in. Is there a way we can create a template for producing these companies that allows us to reach a younger or newer group of theater companies?’” The new model places less financial demand on the visitors, while

still allowing them to have a larger footprint in terms of visibility and reach. The young artists also gain access to a community of mentors.

Today Steppenwolf's influence extends far beyond its humble beginnings in Highland Park. In addition to touring productions domestically—to Washington, DC and Los Angeles, for example—the company has also brought work to the Galway Arts Festival in Ireland, the Barbican Centre in London, and the Melbourne Festival in Australia. Yet, it has no intention of getting too comfortable with its reputation and still looks to break new ground. In 2009

it produced its first Shakespeare play, *The Tempest*, directed by Tina Landau and featuring a number of ensemble members. Last year saw the launch of yet another new project: the NEXT UP festival, a collaboration with Northwestern University featuring directors and designers from the school's graduate theater program.

"I think Steppenwolf has really gotten itself into a situation," said McCraney, looking at all the current activities of the theater company, "where it's reaching out to the future and paying homage to the past and living very much in the present." ▲

The Steppenwolf cast of *August: Osage County*, written by theater company member Tracy Letts and winner of the 2008 Pulitzer Prize in Drama.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL BROSILOW



Shelter from the Storm

Artful Rebuilding with the
Mississippi Arts Commission



BY DIANA METZGER

“When you live in a place like Mississippi, you are so used to suffering that things like economic recessions and economic downturns don’t even really register,” said Malcolm White, Mississippi Arts Commission’s executive director since 2006. He stepped into this challenging position only a few months after Hurricane Katrina hit and devastated the entire state, physically and emotionally. “There’s that line from a song: ‘When you ain’t got nothing, you ain’t got nothing to lose.’ So we’re kind of used to not having much. We’ve long since made our own way and learned to live on little, and the arts are resilient.”

Mississippi Arts Commission (MAC) may feel it came out of the storm with just a little, but its impact and influence on supporting and rebuilding not only the arts in Mississippi, but the architecture and public morale as well, has been monumental through the years.

Back in 2006, *NEA Arts* covered the damage caused by the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi—including the issue’s cover image, the Ohr-O’Keefe Museum in Biloxi, Mississippi. PHOTO BY SUSAN DODDS

MAC was founded in 1968, in part from funds from the still fledgling National Endowment for the Arts. Since then, MAC has striven to make the state’s rich cultural heritage accessible to its community, from the blues of the Mississippi Delta to the writings of William Faulkner and Eudora Welty. For a state with chronically high unemployment and an educational system that consistently ranks near the bottom of the National Assessment and Educational Progress annual report, this has not been easy. But MAC places a high priority on providing access to the arts to these underserved communities. Projects such as *Museums on Wheels*, a traveling exhibit on the basic elements of visual art geared for both adults and students, and the *Mississippi Arts Hour*, a weekly arts interview radio show, showcase the importance of arts in ways that bring it right to the communities’ doorsteps. MAC has

also launched specialty websites providing detailed information about local visual and folk artists.

Making the arts a priority in schools is also one of MAC's major goals. The organization launched the Whole Schools Initiative in the early 1990s as a small-scale grant program; it has now blossomed into a successful, nationally recognized arts integration education model. Whole Schools provides teachers at all school levels with opportunities for retreats and seminars on practical ways to incorporate the arts into daily curricula. The commission recently created another education initiative that not only weaves the arts into school curricula, but also addresses a major statewide issue: childhood obesity. MAC partnered with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Mississippi to create Moving Toward the Art of Good Health, which trains physical education teachers in ballroom dancing in order to bring that artistic skill and new form of exercise into school gymnasiums all across the state.

While access and education are roles traditionally addressed by an arts agency, MAC is one of the few forced to rethink their grantmaking by nature: specifically, the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes.

"We don't just make grants and services in good weather," said White. "The way we deliver it is a bit different now than when I arrived. I think we ramped it up and created this new kind of role, this new kind of voice, this new kind of expectation that we have a role to play."

Post-Katrina, many of Mississippi's famed buildings and bridges were in ruins. One such building was Biloxi's Ohr-O'Keefe Museum, for which noted architect Frank Gehry had been charged with designing a new museum campus. Before the storm, it had taken four years for Gehry to complete the design; construction of the space had begun a year before the storms hit and ripped apart what had been started. MAC received a Gulf Coast Hurricane Relief grant from the NEA for more than \$50,000 and put a chunk of that toward helping to rebuild the museum. The museum itself received its own NEA grant for \$15,000, which not only supported renovations but also allowed conservation scientists from the Winterthur Museum in Delaware to restore the Ohr-O'Keefe's famed art collections. In November 2010, the museum opened what they called Phase I of the new museum, which includes the Mississippi Sound Welcome Center, IP Casino Resort Spa Exhibitions Gallery, Gallery of African American Art, and the Pleasant Reed





The Bay St Louis Bridge, rebuilt after the hurricane with local art incorporated into the structure. PHOTO BY JOHN THOMAS PHOTOGRAPHY

Interpretive Center. Additional sections of the museum are expected to be unveiled this year.

When the Bay St. Louis Bridge, which connects Bay St. Louis and Pass Christian, collapsed because of the storm, MAC worked with the Hancock County Chamber of Commerce and the Mississippi Department of Transportation to not only rebuild the bridge, but to incorporate local art into the structure. What came out of this collaborative effort was the Bay St. Louis Public Art Project, where the three groups chose drawings from local artists that were then made into 22 mile-marker brass plaques along the length of the bridge. Two large-scale stone markers flanking the bridge entrance also feature beautiful Mississippi artwork.

“We were front and center on the rebuilding of the bridges because we had this thought that yes, we could rebuild bridges, but if we really focused on connecting communities through bridges using the arts and culture, then we would be more successful,” said White. “So both of the major bridges...that were rebuilt had walking trails, bike trails, and art on them, and they tell the community story as you go from one side to the other.”

Two students from Bay/Waveland Middle School during a ballroom dance class as part of the Mississippi Arts Commission’s program, Moving Toward the Art of Good Health. PHOTO BY SUSAN DOBBS



When a whole state gets destroyed, it would be easy to think that a state arts agency would not be able to focus on the arts at the neighborhood level, but MAC knew that those small arts institutions impact their communities in a major way. Micro-arts spaces needed just as much innovative thinking and financial attention as their larger counterparts. The Bay St. Louis Little Theatre is one of those local arts institutions.

The group had performed in the same historic theater space for 60 years before Hurricane Katrina tore apart the place the artists called home. “After Katrina there was absolutely nothing left,” said Cheryl Grace, the theater’s president. “The [theater] board went from 13 people to five; everyone on the board had lost everything.”

Grace and the remaining board members searched for a building to renovate for more than four years, eventually finding an abandoned, historic building scheduled to be demolished. The first grant the theater company received from MAC was used to purchase the building, while a second grant supported the purchase of furniture and light and sound technology. The first season in the new theater sold out for every performance. The theater has just received its third MAC grant, which it plans to use to attach a larger, state-of-the-art theater onto its current space.

With all the progress Mississippi Arts Commission has made since Hurricane Katrina, it would be easy to see why it might continue to focus exclusively on rebuilding. But the commission cannot help but push excitedly toward the future, especially when it comes to the creative economy in the state. MAC produced a study, undertaken in partnership with the Mississippi Development Authority, *Realizing the Economic Potential of Creativity in Mississippi*, which revealed that about 61,000 Mississippians are employed in the arts, about three percent of the total state’s employed population. The report suggested that the arts could be incorporated not just into schools, but also different sectors of the economy, such as pairing artisans with farmers.

White is ready to incorporate art statewide throughout Mississippi. He noted, “Creativity and innovation are the new currency in this global economy, and Mississippi has a rich and diverse inventory of assets.” ▲

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PHOTO BY AMBER STAR MERKENS

Hearing a Different Drummer

IN STEP WITH MARK MORRIS

BY REBECCA GROSS

When the Arts Endowment first gave Mark Morris a choreography fellowship in 1983, he was still something of a rookie. His three-year-old company, the Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG), was operating on a shoestring budget, with dancers receiving little if any compensation. The group performed just a handful of shows a year, and the closest thing they had to a headquarters was Morris' apartment. Twenty-nine years and a stockpile of NEA grants later, Morris has become one of the most respected, accomplished forces in modern dance.

His work has been described as “genius,” “irreverent,” “charming,” and “inventive.” He is known for subverting gender roles—women lifting men, dancers decked in drag—and his dancers' physiques defy the spare silhouettes so commonly found on stage. *Deck of Cards* (1983) featured a solo by a remote-controlled car and *Hard Nut* (1991) brilliantly reinvents *The Nutcracker* with vivacious 1970s panache while keeping Tchaikovsky's original score intact. In other words,

Morris' pieces might break or make the rules, but it's rare, if ever, that they follow them.

Although this once marked Morris as the “bad boy” of dance, the choreographer has long since proven that his pioneering style cannot be pigeonholed. A music aficionado, Morris has choreographed works to Handel, Stravinsky, and Mozart, and collaborated with cellist Yo-Yo Ma and jazz pianist Ethan Iverson. He has moved freely between modern dance, ballet, and opera, choreographing for companies such as the Paris Opera Ballet and the Metropolitan Opera. His latest project for the San Francisco Ballet, *Beaux*, opened on Valentine's Day.

This range is part of what has kept Morris so fresh through the years. There is always a new story to tell and new movement to explore. His scope also extends to the emotional realm, which has helped make him appealing to even casual spectators of dance. “[My work] shows a full range of emotional activity. It's real tragedy and real comedy,” he said, two topics which anyone with

a beating heart can relate to. “I’m not telling [audiences] that it’s esoteric and they won’t understand.”

Morris was born in 1956 in Seattle, Washington, where he began dancing at an early age with local dance teacher Verla Flowers. He was originally taken with flamenco, but later turned his attention to Balkan folk dancing and joined the Koleda Folk Ensemble. He began choreographing while still a teenager, and premiered his first work, *Barstow*, when he was just 16. Later, he traveled through Macedonia, Greece, and Spain to pursue both flamenco and traditional Balkan dance, but ended up moving to New York in 1976 where he began to make his reputation in modern dance.

Since then, Morris’ professional life has been marked by one triumph after another. He founded his own dance group in 1980, which he continues to head with the same energy and incredible prolificacy that he displayed in his youth. From 1988 to 1991, MMDG served as the resident dance company of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, the national opera house of Belgium. The experience gave the choreographer access to his own space and a much higher budget than he had enjoyed at home, allowing him to create “large pieces that I could never have made in the United States,” he said. Morris produced some of his most famous works during MMDG’s three years overseas, including *L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* (1988) and *Dido and Aeneas* (1989).

The Mark Morris Dance Group in *Dido and Aeneas*. PHOTO COURTESY OF MMDG/COSTAS



Next came the White Oak Project, which Morris founded with Mikhail Baryshnikov in 1990 as the touring arm of the Baryshnikov Dance Foundation. In 1991, Morris was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, and in 2001, the Mark Morris Dance Center opened in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, fulfilling a long-time goal of Morris' to provide his dancers with a permanent space.

Throughout the years, the common backbone through all of his work has been music. He insists on live music at all of his performances; even his rehearsals are accompanied by a pianist. When explaining why he refuses to succumb to recorded music, as many choreographers and companies have, Morris asks, "Why not then have a video of dancers, or why not just stay home and watch it on TV? I want an audience that's live and a performance that's live. Of course it's more expensive, and time-consuming, and a pain," he acknowledged. "But it's also better. I insist that everybody be conscious in the room and that's what makes my work so good."

His passion for and expertise in music have even given him the chance to work as a guest conductor, which he described as "scary." "You have to think slightly ahead of what's happening instead of while it's happening, which is what you do as a dancer," he said.

The extraordinary trajectory of Morris' career has been, by all accounts, quite a ride, which Morris acknowledges with gratitude. "I have a great job. I'm good at it. I'm fortunate," he said. "My dancers receive health insurance, and have a warm, decent, clean building. I'm in demand as a choreographer. I'm doing exactly what I want."

He also realizes how rare that is. "It's a nightmare to me that the arts aren't more prominent," he said, both in terms of funding and arts education. Even at his level—the height of his field—he sees the holes created by the art world's financial underbelly. "The weirdness of demand and reward is so bizarre," he said. "I want to be able to pay my dancers more. I want to have an orchestra of my own. I want to continue to do exactly what I'm doing and not have to hustle for anything."

But it's not artists' livelihoods that he is most concerned about; it's society in general. "When I was a kid, we went on field trips to the opera, to the symphony, to the international part of town," Morris said. "And that was public school. It was extremely important to everybody, whether you became a professional



Mark Morris Dance Group's performance of the choreographer's *Mozart Dances*. PHOTO BY STEPHANIE BERGER

artist or not. [Art] is civilizing. It produces kinder, more intelligent people."

To that end, MMDG offers in-school residencies to Brooklyn schools, using *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* as a tool for teaching children about dance, music, and poetry. The company has also teamed up with the Brooklyn Parkinson Group to create the Dance for PD® program, which offers dance classes to Parkinson's Disease patients at the Mark Morris Dance Center. And a partnership with the New York City Housing Authority has led to free weekly dance classes for children, teens, and senior citizens living in public housing in Brooklyn. "Some people have more difficult lives than others," Morris said. "They can't be made worse by an injection of an artistic kindness."

It's a point that's hard to argue. This kindness, he hopes, will begin to reinvigorate a culture that he fears is beginning to flatline. It is too easy to get by on mediocrity, he thinks, and treating art as a luxury rather than a necessity will only serve to truncate horizons and derail any progress toward a "compassionate culture."

"Imagination, risk, daring, personality, participation, inquisitiveness, rigor," he listed, naming words that could all be applied to his own work and vision. "Those are the things I say need to be more respected." ▲

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