



# THE CALIFORNIA PRESENTER

California  
PRESENTERS

DECEMBER 31, 2003



**HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!**

**PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE**

**KEVIN O'CONNOR; THEATRE DIRECTOR, DOWNEY CIVIC THEATRE**

Happy New Year from the Board and Officers of California Presenters.

This year is ending on an unprecedented challenging note as many of us struggle with the budget implications that Sacramento has wrought. How this eventually will shakeout is not yet clear.

Your CP organization, I am pleased to say, remains strong, vibrant and financially healthy; in large part due to the Infrastructure Grant (now suspended due to the dramatic reduction in the CAC budget) from the California Arts Council (CAC) spearheaded by CAC Director Barry Hessenius. We are grateful to the Council, Barry and staff members Juan Carrillo, Scott Heckes and Patti Milich for their continued support and belief in the mission of CP.

Additionally, CP remains the preeminent consortia because of your active membership and participation. I am honored to participate in the administration of your organization with such talented Officers and Board Members from up and down the state and from organizations large and small.

As you read this issue of the newsletter please note the dates for our annual June Meeting and Artists Information Exchange. We are excited to be back in Los Angeles at the Omni Hotel and adjacent to Grand Performances and the Music Center – the Performing Arts Center of Los Angeles County. A great hotel and terrific room rate, cheap airfare and convenient public transportation will make the meeting accessible to one and all. Your Vice President Nancy Martino is doing an outstanding job in organizing the meeting.

In concert with dynamic and politically astute Marie Acosta of the Latino Arts Network, and other members of the CAC Infrastructure Group, we are actively talking, exploring and working towards a goal of how to reinstate respectable funding for the Arts in California. Several themes are beginning to emerge and a January meeting in Los Angeles will hopefully provide the opportunity for a consensus on how to proceed. I will keep you updated as pertinent parts of the plan emerge.

I value your thoughts and opinions. Please feel free to contact myself or any Officer or Board Member with suggestions, comments or hints on how we might serve you, the CP membership, better.

Best wishes in 2004!

**➔ ANNUAL JUNE MEETING IN LOS ANGELES, JUNE 24-26; SEE INFO ON PAGE 3...**



## LOOKING BACK...

**THE 2008 JUNE ARTIST INFORMATION EXCHANGE  
MICHELLE WITT, ARTS & LECTURES DIRECTOR, UCSC**

Although we who attend California Presenters conferences come from a wide variety of institutions with diverse audiences and artistic missions, **we all participate in California Presenters for one basic reason: the Artist Information Exchange.** In a recent survey, the number one reason our members said they chose to attend the CP June conference in San Francisco was to keep informed about a variety of artists and tours, hear the expert opinions of their colleagues, network and create block booking possibilities. **There is no other organization that provides the quality, in-depth opportunities for artist information exchange among colleagues than California Presenters.**

Many who attended the CP meeting last June in San Francisco told us that they thought it was **the best meeting ever.** We heard that our **new Artist Information Exchange format** was a major part of that overall feeling. Last June, we increased the depth of



discussion of artistry and expertise within each artistic discipline, reduced the number of artists discussed, and included a wide variety of examples of artists' work. In addition to that, **we had some of our best discussion leaders ever.**

Among some of the **HIGHLIGHTS** were the superb National Dance Project presentation led by **Celesta Billeci, Walter Jaffe** and **Mark Murphy**, the incredibly informative Jazz panel led by **Tim Jackson** and **Randall Kline** and the all-time best World Music session led by **Hannah Bader** and **Isabel Soffer.** We also created a new Manager's presentation led by **Rachael Cohen, Don Osbourne** and **Julia Glawe**, to give manager members the opportunity to discuss issues they want presenters to be aware of and issues that managers need help with.



Our **EXCELLENT DISCUSSION LEADERS** selected artists which they believe are doing the best work **AVAILABLE**, presented **extensive video/CD examples of artists repertory**, brought examples of marketing and promotion materials and discussed how to most effectively market each artist. In addition, our discussion leaders spoke about appropriate education/outreach activities for each artist and gave an overview of funding and commissioning opportunities.

We continue to hear how much CP members enjoyed this new format, and how informative, fun and truly useful it has proven to be as they book their seasons. **If you didn't attend last June's conference in San Francisco, we hope you definitely don't miss this upcoming conference in LA - which promises to be even better!** We have many more ideas for in-depth information sharing and exceptional panelists. We look forward to taking what we learned last June and bringing it to an even higher level. **I'll see you there!**



## NUTS & BOLTS...

### INFO OF INTEREST FOR CP MEMBERS

#### 2004 JUNE MEETING SET -- SAVE THE DATE NOW!

The 2004 edition of California Presenters' annual Artist Information Exchange meeting has been set for **Thursday through Saturday, June 24, 25 and 26 in Los Angeles.** The Omni Los Angeles Hotel at California Plaza (home of Grand Performances) will host the gathering. Besides the usual good CP stuff, having the meeting downtown L.A. will allow "beind-the-scenes" looks at Walt Disney Concert Hall and the REDCAT Theatre, the newest additions to the Music Center/Performing Arts Center of Los Angeles County. Also within easy walking distance are the Museum of Contemporary Art, Colburn School of Performing Arts and Los Angeles' historic Broadway theatres. Planning is well underway for what is sure to be one of CP's best meetings ever. Registration materials will be mailed in March, but mark your calendar now so you don't miss out!

#### 2004 MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS -- WATCH FOR THEM...

With the start of a new year, it's time to once again renew your CP membership. Given the current economic picture, the board has decided to keep annual dues for California Presenters at their same historically low level:

<i>Presenters, Budgets &gt; \$50k</i>	<i>\$150</i>
<i>Presenters, Budgets &lt; \$50k</i>	<i>\$100</i>
<i>Each additional person from presenting organization:</i>	<i>\$100</i>
<i>Affiliates (Artists, Managers):</i>	<i>\$ 50</i>

Watch the mail in January for your membership renewal form or, if you're feeling ambitious, drop a check in the mail to Pat Kopp together with your current contact information.

## PRESENTER LISTSERVE -- GET PLUGGED IN!

One valuable membership benefit for CP presenters is access to the organization's e-mail listserve where members share ideas, organize tours and generally keep in touch with other presenter members. If you're not already taking part in the listserve, take the time now to sign up and get plugged in.

Signing up is easy. Simply send an e-mail with "Subscribe" in the subject line to:

**Californiapresenters-subscribe@yahoogroups.com**

You will receive an e-mail reply in which you will be asked to confirm your 'subscription.' Follow the directions. Before your subscription is activated, your subscription request will be reviewed by Pat Kopp to verify that you are a current presenter member of CP. Once verified, you will start receiving e-mails with the listserve discussion. You will also be able to post messages to the listserve simply by sending an e-mail to:

**Californiapresenters@yahoogroups.com**

You can "unsubscribe" at any time you would like.

When using the listserve, please note that there are two ways to respond to any message you receive. In most e-mail programs, choosing to "respond" to a message from the listserve will result in your response being broadcast back to all listserve subscribers. This is appropriate if you feel that your response will be of general interest and may help further the listserve discussion. Sometimes, however, you may want to respond directly to the person who sent a listserve message without broadcasting to all subscribers. To do this, you should send a new e-mail message to that person (making sure that their e-mail address is in the "To:" line of the message rather than the listserve's address) – an easy way to do this is by choosing to "forward" the original message to the person you wish to send the message to with your notes added.

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*June 2003 AIE Images: p. 2, UL: Lois Wagner & Jan Oetinger Show Off CP 20th Anniversary Cake at Biscuit & Blues lunch meeting; p. 2, LL: Isabel Soffer and Hannah Bader leading World Music session of Artist Information Exchange; p. 2, RM: Brian McCurdy, Bruce Labadie & Geoff English "roughing" it at the Teatro Zinzanni extravaganza; p. 3, top, Kevin O'Connor addressing the "troops" at the CP 20th Anniversary Reception in the Starlight Room high atop San Francisco's Sir Francis Drake Hotel.*



## LOOK UP, LOOK UP, LOOK UP!

### PERSPECTIVE FROM THE FIELD

EXCERPTS FROM THE CLOSING ADDRESS OF  
THE 2003 TCG CONFERENCE; JUNE 14, 2003

BEN CAMERON; EXEC. DIR., THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

Well, here we are, three-and-a-half exhausting, exhilarating, extraordinary days later, and per our custom, it now falls to me to reflect back a bit on the things we've heard together, to offer some thoughts on what this all might mean and to point us toward the outside world and the next 24 months into which we must return.

Clearly, we found much to celebrate. We have, as a field, turned our attention to developing our boards—and what allies they have become, more than doubling their contributions to our theatres over the last five years, and now covering more than 6 percent of our expenses through their donations, as opposed to a mere 2.7 percent five years ago. We have reached out more aggressively to other individuals, doubling their role as well from 7.3 percent to 14.6 percent of our expense line — a reminder of the importance and the unflagging devotion of our managing leaders and our development personnel. We have been creative in pursuing co-productions, in making new partnerships with one another and with the commercial sector.

We have been fantastically innovative in reconceiving many of our most time-honored practices. For instance, Brat Productions of Philadelphia consistently fills its houses by diverting its marketing budget from assorted print materials to matchbooks — matchbooks left in bars and clubs where they are seized by a hip, younger crowd who then go to the theatre. In Atlanta, Theatre Emory launched its Ambassadors program, which gives select audience members backstage exposure and insight into the creative journey in exchange for bringing new friends with them every time they come to a performance. In Houston, *Infernal Bridegroom* integrated rock musicians into the ensemble and infiltrated rock clubs as performance venues to overwhelming success. San Jose Repertory Theatre expo-

nentially increased attendance by young parents by simultaneously offering classes in creative dramatics for children during performance times — a strategy that acknowledges that we will never be child care professionals, but that exploits the immensity of knowledge we have accumulated in our arts education work.

We have seen the New American Shakespeare Tavern in Atlanta reconceive its corporate donor universe to embrace law firms — businesses who, like us, share a deep investment in freedom of expression issues and for whom a sponsorship and the opportunity to socialize are now key strategies in demonstrating community investment to potential associates and law students. In San Diego, we have seen Sledgehammer Theatre repackage its subscription series as “Repeat Offenders,” no longer selling a single seat, but an entry into a circle where audience members can see any production as many times as they wish — countering the impression of an empty house with every return visit, and bringing new friends with new confidence. Essentially, this strategy does the audience development work for the theatre — and “Repeat Offenders” are renewing in record numbers, remembering not the play they disliked or even the ones they missed, but remembering most strongly the play they loved and that they saw multiple times. In New York, the ever inspiring Melanie Joseph moved to a virtual organization construct with the Foundry Theatre, developing fantastic work with minimal resources and still giving her artists a respectable living wage.

In general, we have seen the benefits of earlier curtain times, more extended artist interaction in talkbacks, and the possibilities of open rehearsals at many theatres across the country. And we have seen, even in the midst of a relentless march to comedy and entertainment, a rise in audiences who are hungry to engage in serious political and social work — work that shot out of the proverbial gate with *The Guys* just two weeks after 9/11 and that has continued through *Homebody/Kabul*, *The Exonerated*, *Infernal Bridegroom's We Have Some Planes*, the thrilling *Lysistrata Project*, seen on more than 1,000 stages worldwide, the just opened *The Persians* in New York, and the International WOW Company performance of yesterday, to name just a few.

But as we return to our lives around the country, we cannot deny that these challenges seem more and more overwhelming with the passage of every day — and that they will, indeed, compound with time. While 44 percent of you expect a deficit, only 29 percent of you expect a surplus; 50 percent of you are looking at frozen or reduced budgets for the 2004

fiscal year; only 44 percent of you saw growth in subscriptions and only 46 percent saw growth in single tickets. The most encouraging sign was that 60 percent of you saw an increase in individual contributions — but only 33 percent of you experienced a rise in corporate or government contributions. And remembering the number of theatres who are absent from this convening because of financial duress, the probability is that the numbers for the field as a whole will be even more dire.

New tax legislation — especially the proposed permanent elimination of the inheritance tax — undermines the charitable impulse, even as it polarizes our nation along new, increasingly extreme class lines. An emerging generation of blue-collar millionaires — a class fascinatingly documented in *The Millionaire Next Door* — seems wed to a concept of reward and gratification, rather than one of stewardship and responsibility: virtually all the millionaires interviewed for the book seized a \$100 honorarium rather than donating it to a favorite charity, saying, “I am my own favorite charity.” A report from former senator Bill Bradley — a report undertaken at great expense and that used the same firm that had lauded Enron as the ideal corporation — has told us that not-for-profits waste far too much money by not getting large enough gifts from fewer sources. (Gee, why didn’t I think of that? Guess I’ll have to stop telling my donors; “Please not so much. A smaller check, please,” and stop returning those large checks. And, given that Bradley tells us that we waste too much time on donors who give too little, I guess I should have focused only on those folks who start their gifts at the seven-figure level.) In essence, it is a report that we know to be flawed and ludicrous, but which is setting the stage for larger, wholesale attacks on not just theatre, but the entire not-for-profit sector.

We know that tax reductions from Washington, DC, are not a savings but a shift in responsibilities, resulting in the assault on state arts budgets that we are witnessing around the nation and by the increased tendency of state and local governments, who are — following the steps of individual public schools, who are already adept at attracting corporate sponsorships — solving civic problems by attracting private donations. Having long been worried about the blurring of lines between the for-profit and the not-for-profit sectors, we now face assault on the government end, as New York City mayor Mike Bloomberg and the NEA, among others, hire development

directors at senior level positions to fund programs. And while we are immensely grateful for our boards and contributors, how long can it be before we max out a limited circle of supporters?

In these moments, our refinements and our creative solutions — as wonderful as they are — are increasingly groaning and stretching to the breaking point. I am in deep sympathy with Adrienne Rich’s poem *The Dream of a Common Language*, where she says,

*The rules break open like a thermometer  
Quicksilver spills across charted systems.  
We’re out in a country that has no language,  
No laws, we’re chasing the raven and the wren  
Through gorges unexplored since dawn.  
Whatever we do together is pure invention.  
The maps they gave us were out of date  
By years....*

Ted Halstead started our time together with his articulation of the current moment — the confluence of war, economic depression, technological reinvention and shifting demographics — as the prelude to a fundamental redefinition of the social contract. In essence, his words are both an invitation and a dire warning — one easier to appreciate if you imagine,

even for moment, being in a theatre in the 1920s and early 1930s. I was astounded to realize that there were more than 2,000 professional stock companies in this country in 1918. How easy it would have been, running one of these companies, to

have thought in 1929 when the market collapsed, “Gee, if we can just keep our heads down for five or six years, the economy will have recovered by 1936 or so, and then we’ll be full steam ahead.” But by 1936, the world was fundamentally different: talking pictures had swept the nation, redefining our entertainment options through technology; an explosion of not-for-profits, many of which we now take for granted, were established to meet social challenges. There was social security, a new tax structure, and soon women were in the workplace in record numbers — causing a realignment of family bonds and an entirely new set of social assumptions. There was no return to 1928; and, indeed, there will be no return to 1999. As Abraham Lincoln said in his 1862 State of the Union address, “*The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.*” Our challenge in looking ahead is not how to hunker down and survive, but how to meet the short-term challenges

**Our challenge in looking ahead is not how to hunker down and survive, but how to meet the short-term challenges while positioning ourselves for the new chapter...**

(Cameron, *Look Up* - continued from p. 5)  
while positioning ourselves for the new chapter, even while we are uncertain as to what that chapter will be.

Consider that it took the theatre decades to recover, and in part, it began to flourish in the 1950s and beyond, not only for the reasons I articulated before, but also because of the changes in the larger environment — indeed, a context that Jerry Yoshitomi in a recent meeting called the “authorizing environment” — that set of conditions that positively impel a group forward, that seed and nourish a movement, which, in our case, led us gradually from that nucleus of 23 theatres to the more than 1,500 we have today. Perhaps the not-for-profit theatre flourished out of the positive impulses that flowed from the Second World War — the curiosity in international relations and culture that GI’s brought home with them after years of fighting abroad; the rise in educational achievement and intellectual development afforded to record numbers of citizens by the *GI Bill*; the belief and optimism of a flourishing economy; and the perception, at least, that the future would see a radical increase in social and self-reflective time. Our economy began to flourish on the heels of a policy that increasingly celebrated diversity and opened our borders to the world’s most creative citizens — truly becoming the beacon to the world that our Statue of Liberty had long symbolized.

Clearly, many of these positive factors in our authorizing environment have eroded with time. Education increasingly has become a source of concern and derision, as American achievements have notably slipped behind in relation to our counterparts; we find ourselves facing record unemployment levels; social and self-reflective time seem to be at an all-time low; the increase in entertainment options has exponentially vaulted beyond our wildest imaginings with the creation of online technology, DVDs and casinos to name a few. Recent events in Iraq suggest that we are now pursuing a national policy counter to diversity and border openness; a policy that insists on homogeneity, uniformity and closed, insular self-protectionism. Subtle changes run more deeply: the shift in the expectation that, for the first time in human history, our lives will outlive the work we are charged with doing. This is a shift symbolized by the disappearance of the retirement gift watch — an eloquent reminder, perhaps, of human mortality but also an embodiment of a legacy of achievement, a testament to the value of an effort by the bestowing of a gift that, like the work achieved, would be an

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heirloom, handed down to generation after generation. Now instead, we have the Swatch; we expect our computers to be discarded with frequent regularity; and we have adopted attitudes of disposable relationships, disposable residences, disposable employment. The average American now changes jobs every three years, and the average American under 30 changes jobs every six months — surely a shift in attitudes that promotes consumption rather than stewardship, that reinforces our allegiance to mass entertainment and undermines our own quest for longer meaning, for substance, for a dialogue that transcends time and that emphasizes the quest for the eternal rather than the ephemeral.

Clearly it is easy to despair, and, perhaps, we should despair. But the authorizing environment, like an actor’s objective in the classic Method way, must be

predicated on a positive influence. Finding those positives to which we can attach ourselves, aligning ourselves with those trends in preparation for the new chapter, is our challenge; being sensitive to the possibilities of the current authorizing environment moves us past deploring the present to mastering the future.

izing environment moves us past deploring the present to mastering the future.

Now I wish I had the crystal ball and the power of a Vatican Sibyl, so that I could predict the future with confidence and ease. But there are some positives that I think might warrant our attention. Robert Putnam, in his famous *Bowling Alone*, traces the disintegration of the American social unit — for example, our new found preferences for individual jogging and weightlifting over team sports, our love of individual computer games over bridge clubs and canasta groups, our withdrawal from a political sphere as seen in the decline in voting and the preference to participate on an individual level — writing letters and sending contributions rather than attending meetings, participating on committees and the like. And yet, Putnam notes three counter trends that are compelling:

- the redefinition of the social unit as a result of technology — a reminder that the telephone was initially seen as an innovation that would destroy the neighborhood, but instead merely redefined what the neighborhood was by allowing us to transcend our geographic limitations with regularity — and the exponential growth in online communities and conversation;
- the rise in book clubs and therapy groups —

structured contexts where people can talk about feelings and meaning; and

- the rise in grass roots political movements, whether through the feminist movement or the gay rights movement or arguably through the massive swelling of antiwar protests in city after city across this nation.

In short, in this moment — a time in which texts on spirituality are the fastest growing section of book sales — people are searching for meaning in their lives and for the opportunity to engage in exploration around ideas and feelings of substance. If we cannot attach ourselves to these impulses, we are missing perhaps the most powerful opportunities for us — opportunities to now position theatre productions not only as the culmination of individual and collective energies and imagination, but also as the prelude to deeper social engagement, deeper self and community understanding, deeper meaning, the ability to engage in and to engage within.

If we heed Ted Halstead correctly, this is an invitation for a redefinition of our own social contracts — an invitation that is deeply frightening and more intellectually tangible than easy to pursue. Many of you might have heard the story of the Wallendas — of the elder family leader who had trained for years and had always been told, when a wind comes and you begin to fall, let go of the pole and grab the rope. And, of course, one day he's on the high wire and a huge gust of wind appears: intellectually he knows what he is supposed to do, but this pole has saved his life time and again, this pole has made it possible for him to survive, this pole has been his mainstay, and so he maintains his grasp on the pole — and falls to his death.

Part of our challenge is to overcome this natural fear and find the liberation implicit in the moment, a dialectic that is less about repair than about reconception, to invite audacity while avoiding irresponsibility.

This work will require us to be our most creative, to husband those emotional resources that we need to survive, to be clear and fearless in our pursuit of core values. It will require us to reconceive the artist-administrator dialogue — to see the artistic home not as the home provided, but as the home mutually created, to overcome the polarity that has relegated the vision without responsibility to the artist and the responsibility without conception to the manager, heeding Zelda Fichandler's extraordinarily simple description of the institutional schism as “not about this or that, but about this and that.” It will lead us back to basics and reinvention — and it will be fatiguing and fraught with setbacks. It will call on us

to reach most deeply and to be most clear. And in these times, it will call on us, not to protect our structures but to protect and husband our creativity — artistic creativity, managerial creativity, administrative creativity — all born of seven impulses:

- openness;
- flexibility;
- ability to withstand criticism;
- patience — working over time;
- mental fluency — juggling multiple ideas;
- passion and persistence; and
- the one that is often hardest for me to find in a time where I am consumed with rage or overpowered with despair, a sense of wonder.

It is for this sense of wonder that I am returning now to the theatre — the ability to wonder, to try on the lives of others and see how they fit, to imagine life other than how it is lived now; the wonder of every production, a sort of minor miracle of effort and coordination and power; and the wonder of the inability — of even the most difficult moments — to squash the human impulse to produce art. It is the invincibility of this human impulse that fills me and inspires me most — a wonder I experience to some degree every time I take a seat and the house lights begin to fade — and it is the central conviction that any dilemma we create is a human-made dilemma that, therefore, can be “human correctable.”

Perhaps the enormity of this unknown lies at the heart of a new cross-generational dialogue that I am seeing in the field — the value of conversations between our founding generation and our newest artists, a dynamic Peter DuBois of Perseverance Theatre likened to a conversation between grandparents and grandchildren, characterized by an openness and candor that was impossible for those founders to have with their immediate heirs. I am struck by National Black Arts Festival executive producer Stephanie Hughley's pronouncement that “*I never make an important decision without three generations in the room, with at least one person who doesn't look like me*” — a reminder that innovation properly begins with recollection. As we stand at the brink of a new chapter, we have so much to learn from those who went before and who created the paths where there had been none to see.

In that spirit, let me close by summoning the voices of three generations. For those of you who support the arts and search constantly for those reasons the arts are worth supporting, I give you the words of W. MacNeil Lowry, that same visionary from the Ford Foundation, whom we

(Cameron, *Look Up* - continued from p. 7)

recalled on our first day together. In his 1963 essay *The Arts and Philanthropy*, Lowry offered 10 arguments for the importance of the arts (beautifully phrased) that feel perhaps even more powerful 40 years later:

1. *Importance to the image of American society abroad;*
2. *A means of communication and consequently of understanding between this country and others;*
3. *An expression of national purpose;*
4. *An important influence in the liberal education of the individual;*
5. *An important key to an American's understanding of himself, his times and his destiny;*
6. *A purposeful occupation for youth;*
7. *In their institutional form, vital to the social, moral and educational resources of an American community; and*
8. *Therefore good for business, especially in new centers of population in the Southwest, West and other regions;*
9. *Provide components for strengthening moral and spiritual bastions in a people whose national security is threatened; and*
10. *An offset to the materialism of a new and (generally) affluent society.*

For those of you who create the art, the words from a slightly different generation — Martha Graham — resonate powerfully:

*There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost and the world will not have it.*

*It is not your business to determine how good it is, nor how valuable it is, nor how it compares to other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep open, to be aware directly of the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open.*

*No artist is pleased...there is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer, divine dissatisfaction; a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive...*

But for all of us, whatever our perspective, a story attributed to Fred Adams of Utah Shakespearean

Festival is perhaps the ultimate benediction. Fred relates a wonderful story about his mission work in Norway. As a Mormon, Fred spent the obligatory year or two ministering to others the story of the Church of the Latter Day Saints. He was assigned to Norway, where the combination of language barrier, darkness and cold made the experience dispiriting, to say the least. In a country where darkness comes before 3:00 pm, there were many days where a knock on the door would be followed by unfailingly polite invitations to step inside, blank looks while retelling the story of the Mormons, and Norwegian folk songs sung at length and accompanied by odd alcohol and mysteriously prepared fish. One such night could be dispiriting enough, but months of them began to take its toll, and one night was particularly hard: the snow was especially deep, and as Fred and his companion struggled up a fjörd to head home, Fred found that he was angry and depressed — he had never been colder or more tired or wetter. But suddenly his companion stopped, grabbed Fred's arm and said, "Look up!" And there in its splendor was the *aurora borealis*, shimmering in the night, exploding in color, reminding him of the deeper, more profound mysteries of which we are but a glimmer. That, says Fred, today is what we do in the arts: we tell people to look up. Yes the times are historically hard; yes we can despair; yes we can yield to our own anger in these times. But as Amy Chua said, we have a choice at this moment, and while Tony Kushner may be right — that theatre is not enough to change the world — we know that it can at least be a start by the way we change lives. We know that if we continue in our work and promote change, one person at a time, one audience at a time, one community at a time — change will come.

This conference has, I hope, reminded you that you are not alone — that you are surrounded by friends and colleagues and collaborators in the war for better times. When times are hard, reach out.

This conference has reminded you, I hope, of the strength, the resilience and the power of spirit we all carry. When times are hard, dig deep.

But never forget what we can do. And never forget the lesson we convey to our audiences each time that we take the stage: Look up. Look up. Look up.

God speed you in your travels, and God bless you in your work.

*Used by permission. Theatre Communications Group is the national organization for nonprofit American Theatre. For complete text of this speech, as well as other stimulating discussion and info, visit: [www.tcg.org](http://www.tcg.org).*



## THEATRE IS ESSENTIAL

### AN ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE

EXCERPTS FROM WAA CONFERENCE KEYNOTE SPEECH, 9/4/2003

TIM ROBBINS; ACTOR, WRITER, DIRECTOR

& FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE ACTORS' GANG

Theatre is essential. It is a training ground for our best actors and directors. It is the most profound and immediate way in the performing arts to create a community with an audience. For me it provided sanity and stability when I started to gain notoriety in Hollywood and provides me today with a unique outlet to continue to grow and learn as an actor, writer and director. I can't tell you how many times I have gotten befuddled confused looks from my colleagues in the film industry when I talk with excitement about a new project we are working on at The Actors' Gang. Theatre in Hollywood? Why are you doing that? I guess the assumption with these folks is that theatre is something you do until you become famous and then once again when you are famous for having once been famous. But theatre for me has never been about fame. From the first it has always been about community, about the relationship between actor and audience.

I was lucky enough to be reminded of this recently when I performed *The Guys* at the Flea Theatre in New York City in March 2002. *The Guys* tells the story of an unlikely meeting between a fire captain and a journalism professor in the days following September 11, 2001. The fire captain is a wreck. He has lost eight men, eight friends, eight sons in a way and he must now, as Captain to these men, deliver eulogies at their funerals. He can't write them. He can barely speak. Through a friend of a friend he meets a complete stranger who he hopes can help him compose the eulogies. The play is very simple. It is a testament to the courage of those men that lost their lives that day. It is also a testament to the extraordinary good will and humanity we saw emerge in New York out of the ashes of this tragedy. All over New York, people were "jumping tracks" helping people they would never have met or talked to on September 10th. A great outpouring of

love, volunteerism, and compassion ascended on the city and the play gives testament to that.

Performing that play five months after the 11th in a small theatre eight blocks from Ground Zero was an extraordinary experience. Audiences still profoundly affected by that horrible day were given the opportunity to grieve with others as they heard the stories the Captain told of his men. They were able to laugh as the Captain told of their practical jokes in the firehouse. Most importantly, they could collectively understand that they were not alone in the terrible depression that had set in with all of us as we came to understand the magnitude of the carnage and the loss. In the Flea Theater, tough, stoic firemen heaved in sobs allowing grief to overcome them for the first time since the day they lost so much. Firemen that had, until they saw the play, tried to suck it up and get through it came to realize that their grief was a natural and acceptable emotion. That small theatre was in those moments the center of community, an absolutely essential room where people needed to be. I felt that I was doing the most important work of my life and it was my honor and privilege to do it. The experience made me realize once again how necessary and potent and important theatre can be. And as of last night, according to the stage managers on tour in Illinois and Mississippi, *The Guys* continues to this day to be important and to serve its community. There was still laughter and there were still tears.

But theatre is for me a lifeblood and I feel very lucky to be able to work with actors that I have been with in a company for 22 years at The Actors' Gang. I can do things with them that I could never do in most Hollywood projects. In the last couple of years we have explored the rise of artistic oppression in 1930s Germany in Klaus Mann's *Mephisto*. We presented the West Coast premiere of *The Exonerated*, which examines the true stories of innocent people who have spent years on death row for crimes they didn't commit. We are presenting stories from the Bible in a show currently running called *The Mysteries* and on Friday night and Saturday afternoon we will present a workshop production of a new play I've written and directed called *Embedded* which tells the story of embedded journalists in Iraq and the manipulation of truth on the part of our government with regards to the war.

We have over the course of our 22 years found a way to present these stories to audiences of all kinds. We don't have any interest in preaching to the choir. It's not worth the effort. We have always operated from the belief that theatre is first and foremost entertainment. That in presenting works that address issues of today it is essential first to entertain and then to raise

(Robbins, *Theatre is Essential* - continued from p. 9)

questions. Not to provide answers but to open up a dialogue with an audience through entertaining them. We never assume we are smarter or more enlightened than our audience. If an audience wanted to be lectured to or condescended to there are plenty of pundits and night school professors that could do that for them. We are in the theatre to entertain and to be entertained. And to involve our audience with ideas that are relevant to their lives. They don't need to agree with us. Some leave the theatre deeply affected. Whether they agree or disagree is irrelevant. That they are feeling and thinking when they leave the theatre is completely relevant and essential to what I would hope that we in the theatre are striving for.

The quickest way to discredit or stigmatize the kind of theatre The Actors' Gang does is to call it "political theater." Even I don't want to go to see "political theatre." I want to see theatre that has relevance that presents stories and themes relevant to my life and all of our lives. Is that political? Perhaps it is. But then it would also follow that presenting benign theater that avoids or ignores any social content or relevance is also political.

I recently finished writing a play adaptation of Sister Helen Prejean's book *Dead Man Walking*. In the play there is a quote from Sister Marie Augusta Neal. She says, "To be apolitical in the face of poverty and the injustices surrounding it is to uphold the status quo. To not actively fight against these injustices is to actively condone it. And this is a very political position to take."

When we ignore the world around us, when we blithely entertain, when we view theater as escapism we are in effect saying that theater has no relevance to the world. We are actively choosing to present to our audiences material that ignores the great tradition of groundbreaking theater. I don't think anyone in this room could name the great popular escapist playwright that was a contemporary of Ibsen or Shaw or Brecht. We don't remember those names because they had no relevance to the world around them other than creating a temporary diversion. They did not stand the test of time because their plays did not engage us past the viewing of them. They did not disturb us. We did not carry their plays home with us and into our lives the next morning. We revere O'Neill and Chekhov and Tennessee Williams because they did just that. But why is it that we revere them now in

retrospect for their groundbreaking achievements and theatrical muckraking in societies long ago but don't feel it necessary to present the modern playwrights that possess that same spirit today?

Now I know these are challenging times for entertainment in America. Due to an unstable economy once consistent sources of funding have been drastically compromised. Nonprofits throughout the country are collapsing due to lack of funds, government spending on the arts continues to be cut nationwide as states struggle to compensate in their budgets for unprosecuted corporate crimes and collapsing financial institutions. As funding dries up artistic directors and theater managers face difficult decisions. Can we afford to do a play that is not a guaranteed ticket seller? Do we dare risk controversial subject matter? Do I give up my artistic vision and my belief in what theatre can be so that I can remain safely in this job in this community? Must my beliefs be subservient to my donors?

In the past twenty years we have been witness to the homogenization of culture in America. In the movie

**Theatre can provide an oasis of quality and intelligence amidst the teen-age aesthetic desert that is driving culture today...**

business we have seen the power and vision of the seventies auteur crushed by the bottom line economics of current conglomerate controlled studios. Artistic decisions from casting to the

final cut of the film have landed in the laps of marketing departments. Movies that appeal to adult audiences must make due with smaller budgets and ever shrinking distribution. Intelligent movies must meet the criteria of big action movies. It is not enough to turn a small profit. If a film does not gross five times what it cost it is considered a failure. Why risk money with a product that won't have the big popcorn movie payoff?

Things aren't much better in television and radio. Remember the promise of cable television? If there are 100 channels surely we will see quality increase. We will have a documentary channel, educational channels, theatre channels, science and technology programming, alternative news sources. What did we get? Reality programs, Fox news and re-runs of *Happy Days*. Due to deregulation of the broadcast industry radio has gotten blander and more generic. Play lists, the songs you hear, are the decisions of corporations not individual disk jockeys and those that continue to remain independent must struggle to survive.

In this nationwide environment of corporate sameness in entertainment, as we dumb down our

artistic expectations in pursuit of profit it is the theatre that can still stand apart as a unique voice. The theatre can provide an oasis of quality and intelligence amidst the teen-age aesthetic desert that is driving culture today. It can in fact emerge once again as the place that you go to see something new, something different, something that challenges our perceptions, that makes us discuss our belief systems. It can be the only remaining venue where you can partake in a civic dialogue with people from your community through stories that are relevant to your lives. It can be an inspiration, a lifesaver, a gathering place for ideas, a cauldron of free expression, a place of liberation, a respite for a culturally starved people. It can be the place that we fall in love again with that amazing intoxicating feeling we all had at one point in our lives that led us to this room that led us to lives in the theatre. It can be all these things or it can be something less, something benign and safe and forgettable. (Hall of Fame)

I have great faith in the individuality and tolerance of the American people. We mustn't let the prudish and narrow-minded minority determine our cultural dialogue. We must take chances, follow our hearts, hold our heads high and feel pride when criticized by those that would censor. Because in that criticism you will have called up the spirit of those that first produced Ibsen and Williams and Shaw. We all have the power to re-invent and re-invigorate American culture in our lives, a little bit at a time, in one community after another. All we need is the will and the guts to do it. If you are going to be run out of town for producing, maybe it's God's way of telling you to move back to civilization.

*Used by permission. The complete text of this speech, as well as information about The Actors' Gang theatre company and its programs, is available at [www.theactorsgang.com](http://www.theactorsgang.com). For more information about Tim Robbins and his career, visit his website at: [www.geocities.com/timrobbinspage](http://www.geocities.com/timrobbinspage).*



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MANAGERS and ARTISTS.

## HONOR ROLL

### WAA RECOGNIZES SOME OF CP'S FINEST

*The following were recognized at WAA's 2003 annual conference. Hats off for all of their contributions and efforts on behalf of presenting in the west!*

#### **Robert Cole** (Jerry Willis Award)

Robert took the helm of Cal Performances at U.C. Berkeley in 1986, developing it into one of the preeminent presenting organizations in the country. Not content simply to present existing pieces, Robert has been instrumental in the commissioning of many new works. Lesser known to his presenting colleagues is his extensive musical background and work as a conductor which continues today.

#### **Susan Endrizzi** (Betty Connors Award)

Susan has over twentyfive years experience as a successful artist manager and agent, having founded California Artists Management in 1978 which today represents an eclectic international roster of classical and early music, world music and solo theater artists. Before entering the artist management field, she was a professional musician and university music professor.



#### **Thom Hill** (Member Emeritus)

Thom is today Dean of Fine and Performing Arts at Santa Ana College, but in his "prior" life was perhaps the most instrumental person in the successful development of the Western Arts Alliance for which he became the first Director in 1983, initially serving on a part-time basis through a special arrangement from his presenting position at Citrus Community College.

#### **Lynne Peterson** (Member Emeritus - 2002)

Lynne recently retired from U.C. San Diego after serving the presenting field for over 25 years. During this time she gave extensively of her time and expertise by serving on boards and committees of CP and APAP, on conference committees for the many WAA and CP gatherings held in San Diego, and as a mentor and role model to many in the field.

#### **Dr. Robert Wilkins** (Member Emeritus)

Dr. Wilkins joined the Anchorage Concert Association board in 1953 and since then has worked tirelessly as a volunteer to enable thousands of Alaskans to have the opportunity to directly experience performances by many of the world's greatest artists. He was instrumental in leading the way for the building of the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts. At the age of 80, he continues to assist ACA staff as artistic advisor and is still considered the spine of the ACA.



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21st Annual June Meeting  
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**INSIDE** this issue of *The California Presenter*:

- Reflections on 2003
- Perspectives - Where we go from here...



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