Building Arts Audiences in the Age of Entertainment

BY FRANK RICH

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Author and New York Times columnist Frank Rich delivered Americans for the Arts’ 14th Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy on March 19, 2001, at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The event was sponsored by The Norman Lear Center, which is based at the USC Annenberg School for Communication, and Americans for the Arts.

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FRANK RICH
Frank Rich, a columnist on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times since January, 1994, was given the additional title of senior writer for The New York Times Magazine in January 1999. The dual title is a first for The Times and will allow Rich to explore a variety of topics at greater length than before.


Before joining The Times, Rich was a film and television critic at Time magazine. Earlier he had been a film critic for The New York Post and senior editor of New Times magazine. He was a founding editor of the Richmond Mercury, a weekly newspaper in the early 1970s.

Born in Washington, D.C., Rich is a graduate of its public schools. He earned a B.A. in American History and Literature, graduating magna cum laude from Harvard College in 1971. At Harvard, he was editorial chairman of The Harvard Crimson, an honorary Harvard College scholar, a member of Phi Beta Kappa and the recipient of a Henry Russell Shaw Traveling Fellowship. Rich has two sons and lives in Manhattan with his wife, Alex Witchel, a reporter for The New York Times.
It is a great honor to be here in Washington today to deliver the annual Nancy Hanks Lecture.

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

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

The local gallery scene was spirited and deliciously Bohemian, at least by Washington standards, but wasn’t fashionable. My mother, courtesy of the National Council of Jewish Women, took oil-painting classes taught by Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis, but these artists had to make waves elsewhere to be appreciated in the Nation’s Capital. It became a part of our family lore that if only my mother had availed herself of her teachers’ canvases—offered for sale to their students at prices in the low three-figures—we would have been set for life.
And yet, despite the very limited cultural diet of the city I grew up in, and despite my mother’s failure to capitalize on the art market, there was still enough here for me to be set for life, in the fullest sense. However slight the cultural menu in Washington, my parents exposed me to as much of it as they could.

I did see plays at the National and the Arena. On lazy afternoons, my mother would insist that we wander through the Phillips Collection, then just a single mansion, whose musty interior was, to use a Tennessee Williams phrase, “lit by lightning”—whether by the shimmer of Renoir or the dazzling hieroglyphics of Paul Klee. We were just normal middle-class, Book-of-the-Month-Club-subscribing, Horizon-magazine-reading dilettantes, but for me, at least, my earliest immersions in culture, however limited, took root. There’s hardly a day that I don’t think of my good fortune in having a life that has been informed by art—and haven’t reflected back on just why and how I was captivated by the arts at childhood in such an unlikely place and with such scant indigenous resources.

I left Washington at the end of high school in 1967. Nancy Hanks became chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts about 18 months later, at the dawn of the Nixon Administration in 1969. Though it would be wrong to overestimate the role of Nancy Hanks or any single person in this vast country’s cultural scene—or any single force, the NEA included—her standards and ambitions are alive everywhere in the extraordinarily diverse and deep arts scene we have today. I know I join many here in wishing she were around to see it. Of course I am not just talking about the art scene in the city of Washington, where the changes are self-evident and literally right around you. I am talking about the entire country. I won’t bore you with any figures today, but the explosion of nonprofit arts institutions over the past 30 years is mind-boggling. There may be more first-rate theater companies in the Washington area right now than there were in the entire nation when I was growing up. From relatively new cultural centers like San Jose to rejuvenated grande dames like Cleveland, there is a huge wealth of energetic, home-grown arts organizations of all shapes, sizes, and aesthetic disciplines. As in the old Washington of my youth, artistic treasures pop up in unlikely corners throughout America—even if sometimes they lack the wherewithal, unfortunately.
to be in plain view. To watch hundreds of ravenous theatergoers drive, in
some cases, hundreds of miles to attend the William Inge Theater Festival in
Independence, Kansas—to take just one recent example of my experience—is
to realize how determined many Americans are to enjoy the arts, and how
dedicated many other Americans are to fill this need.

And yet for all this growth, there’s still a sense that something is wrong, that
the arts are in tremendous peril in America, and that today’s children live in
a sea of video games, possess an MTV attention span, and will never learn
the difference between Britney Spears and Brahms. There is some truth to
this point of view—as there is to most caricatures—but I would argue that the
death of culture in America is seriously exaggerated. A country that boasts
Paul Taylor—another native Washingtonian, by the way—and John Adams
and Joan Didion and Martin Scorsese and August Wilson and Jennifer Bartlett
and Maya Lin and Frank Gehry is far from a cultural wasteland.

Yet some perils are worthy of concern, and I want to talk today about some
of them, and what might be done to counteract them.

Let me begin by saying that I am not going to focus on Washington’s part in
all this. At this point the government’s role is highly circumscribed. Much as I
support the NEA, the endowment lacks the money, the clout, and the freedom
to have the huge effect on the culture that it once had—when it was not only
a bigger fish in real fiscal terms but operating in a smaller pond besides.

The NEA of Nancy Hanks and her immediate successors was operating in a
far different country than ours at the dawn of the 21st century. NEA Chairman
Bill Ivey has said that he wants the NEA to be “as important to America as the
department of defense,” and while I applaud his goal, an idealistic vision that
typifies his strong leadership of this agency, I don’t expect this parity to be
achieved in my lifetime. And I know Bill is realistic enough that he probably
feels the same way—though it shouldn’t stop him from dreaming. Indeed that
dream is essential for all of you who have come here to fight for the arts.

Whatever the measurable result in a budget line may be, the fight for greater
arts support is essential and the good done by it is immeasurable. It is your
hard fight that has kept the NEA from disappearing altogether. And that may
lead one day to an America where the arts don’t need this kind of advocacy
because, as Bill Ivey says, culture will be as intrinsic to the country’s identity
and sustenance as a national defense.
In his first budget, George W. Bush has resisted the urge to do anything dramatic about the arts—having kept the NEA's and for that matter the NEH's appropriations at exactly the same level he inherited. While I, like most of you, would have wished for a significant increase, I think the political statement he was making with this flat appropriation is important, and not unhelpful. Coming from a political party that has used arts funding as a nasty and divisive ideological whipping boy in recent years, the President is clearly saying that he has no plans to enlist in those culture wars. He's signaling the members of his party in Congress to hold their fire as well. When you think that only a few years ago Lynne Cheney was calling for the complete abolition of both endowments, this is a significant change.

I see no reason to believe that President Bush is more of a culture maven than most of his recent White House predecessors. But I do think the scapegoating of the NEA is a shrewd political reading of public sentiment. Witness what happened in my own city of New York just a few weeks ago, when our Mayor found another picture that offended him in the Brooklyn Museum—or at least someone found it and sent him a post card. All the elements were in alignment for a fiery controversy: alleged blasphemy on the part of an outspoken but previously obscure artist; the threat of establishing a governmental decency commission on the part of the Mayor; a publicity-crazed museum director ready to milk the dispute for every last admission and headline it might be worth. But the debate died out almost as soon as it began. We’ve all been there, done that, and even excitable New Yorkers yawned. If Mayor Giuliani’s attempt to spark yet another inflammatory public battle between First Amendment advocates and decency defenders were a Broadway show, it would have closed on opening night.

Now that President Bush has, inadvertently or intentionally, taken this rancorous debate off the table at the federal level—at least for now—we are forced to redirect the energy of our cultural debate, to look elsewhere if we are going to have a serious discussion about the arts and their role in our national life. It’s a good time to have that look—a fresh look.

Even if the NEA were at 10 times or 100 times its current budget, it’s hard to imagine how it could challenge one of the biggest impediments to American culture today—our mass entertainment media.
Don’t get me wrong. Entertainment is a vital part of American culture, high and low, and I treasure it. It’s in the very nature of our democratic society that commerce mingles with art, and always with both deleterious and advantageous effects. Some of the best art ever produced in America comes out of Hollywood—even if less so right now than in the 1970s or 1930s or teens. Good things do come in cycles. The broad entertainment marketplace has yielded goodies from Buster Keaton to Frank Sinatra, from *The Godfather* to *Sweeney Todd*. And it will continue to do so, just as it will continue to give us its traditional quotient of cynical, disposable junk. But even as that fundamental and eternal ratio between valuable commercial culture and trash remains fixed, there has been a big change in this media world in recent years that radically affects the relationship of the entire commercial culture to non-commercial culture, otherwise known as the high arts. In a very short period of time over the past decade, the many movie, television, publishing, and music companies of the for-profit culture industry have consolidated into a handful of mega-companies of enormous power. Jack Warner may have been a tyrant in the Warner Bros. of his day, Bennett Cerf may have been a cultural czar of sorts when he personified Random House, and General Sarnoff may have been the giant of RCA, but none of them could have imagined multimedia conglomerates like AOL Time Warner and Viacom and Bertelsmann, which have swallowed up their old companies and dozens like them. Nor could any of the old captains of show business have imagined the sheer cultural reach of the new megaplayers. Whatever cultural product one of these companies chooses to put its muscle behind becomes instantly ubiquitous. Whether it’s *Survivor* or *Hannibal* or Ricky Martin, you cannot escape the pitch. In such a marketplace, it’s very hard for non-pop culture to be heard at all, let alone compete, especially with the most desirable demographic to whom most products are sold—the young people in whose hands the long future of our culture resides.

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

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

In TV, for instance, there was a time—in the 1950s and 1960s—when the then-dominant networks looked at cultural programming as a public service, like news and reasonably altruistic children’s programs, to be bestowed upon the audience in exchange for getting free use of the airwaves to cash in big time in the commercial gold mine of prime time. This meant in practice that a kid of my generation didn’t only get *Gunsmoke* and *The Mickey Mouse Club*, but *Leonard Bernstein’s Young People’s Concerts* and *Mary Martin in Jerome Robbins’s staging of Peter Pan*. The late, great *Ed Sullivan Show*, on Sunday night, the primest of prime time, was really the ultimate American vaudeville—tossing the latest rock and roll sensation onto a bill that might also include a scene from a Broadway show or a piano recital by Van Cliburn or an aria performed by Rise Stevens. I can tell you as a kid who was watching in those days that even a brief exposure to something higher, sandwiched in between Alan King and Topo Gigio, made a lasting impression.

By today’s standards, the cultural offerings on network TV, still the dominant communications medium in America, make Ed Sullivan and his boss at CBS, Bill Paley, look like the Medicis. With all due respect to our host today, even The Kennedy Center Honors has been turned into a cheesy, sub-Ed Sullivan TV special that dumbs down the artistic achievements of the yearly recipients. What’s more, the news divisions of the networks barely cover culture as if it were a major part of American life and American communities.
Real culture seems to make broadcast news only on breakfast shows, or if someone like Rudolph Giuliani is shouting.

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

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

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

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

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

At the local level, our media companies, large and small, should also be shamed into giving more to arts in America than a financial donation or a public-service spot aired in some Nielsen twilight zone. The tuning out of our culture by broadcast media at the local level is just as scandalous as it is at the national level. When I began as a drama critic in the early 1980s, every local TV station in New York reviewed every Broadway play on the 11 o'clock news—and some Off Broadway plays as well. Now no broadcast channels do. And we’re talking about New York—the cultural capital of the country, and one where the arts, the high arts included, are a significant part of the local economic base.

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

If nonprofit cultural institutions are going to have some chance of getting their message out to new audiences at a time when megamedia companies dominate and drive more and more of the culture, especially that which reaches young people, surely they need the help of local newspapers and broadcasters. It's time for cultural leaders in American communities to complain about the
paucity and inadequacy of their coverage to local editors, publishers, and station managers. By this, I don’t mean petty complaints—say, griping about a negative review or the inaccuracies in one particular story—but big-picture complaints. If non-cultural local industries, political institutions and schools can speak up when they feel they’re being shortchanged by their local news media, so can the local symphony, museum, and theater company. Ideally, the local arts institutions should band together and pool their views so they can speak clearly to their local news media about what’s missing. And the complaints should not be vague but backed up by actual data. How many column inches or broadcast time is devoted to the arts as compared to other sectors? Are those amounts in proportion to what the arts contribute to the community—both in terms of actual dollars and incalculable benefits? Presented in this way, the complaints will not seem like special pleading but community-wide concern. Arts should not accept second-class media citizenship behind any other local sector, sports included.

If cultural leaders were to be more assertive in asking for their fair and proper treatment in the media environment, they might actually get some results. The leaders of media companies, national and local, big and small, often hunger for the prestige and cachet of being associated with the higher arts; they want to be seen as cultural figures in the country or their communities; they don’t want to be looked upon as vulgarians. In other words, there are some cards for cultural leaders to play against them in the game of shame. Unfortunately, too many of our cultural leaders today are cowed by these media moguls. It’s easier to decry or confront Jesse Helms or Donald Wildmon than it is ostensibly arts-loving executives, whether Democrat or Republican.

Worse, more and more cultural institutions are trying to emulate the ways of entertainment companies rather than trying to challenge them. While we’re past the point where we can or should upbraid museums for merchandizing schemes and advertising campaigns, which in some sad way may be essential to their survival, it’s defeating for cultural institutions to compromise their core mission, the presentation of culture itself, in the interest of mercantile self-promotion. But too often that’s what’s happening.

Whether it’s the nonprofit theater that is turning away a serious play to produce some cynical musical that might (but probably won’t) have a crack at Broadway, or the orchestra that refuses ever to challenge its audience in its repertory, the results are inevitably stultifying and self-defeating. And, as many have noted of late, it’s hard to see the point of museums staging shows in which the cultural content is secondary, if not non-existent.

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

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

But let’s not pick on the Guggenheim. Few museums can afford to be holier-than-thou these days. The highminded blockbuster art show, a fixture at so many museums, including those in Washington, increasingly seems like high culture’s answer to a stale Hollywood sequel. As the French Impressionists are trotted out again and again under mindless guises, they might as well be fading action stars like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger forced to suit up for yet another mechanical action movie. *The Economist* magazine described the declining dynamics of blockbuster shows best, and most succinctly, a few months ago: “Masterpieces are shuttled around the world, often against the advice of conservation departments, primarily to bring prestige to the lenders, publicity to the sponsors and paying customers to the host institutions.”

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

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

This point was brought home to me in the past few months as I took part in the Open Doors program started by my friend Wendy Wasserstein through the Theater Development Fund in New York. The idea of this program is to expose high-school students in New York to the theater that is right in their midst but which many of them have not experienced. Every few weeks my wife and I go with a group of eight teenagers to a play of our choosing, then spend 90 minutes or so talking about it with them afterwards. In our case, the students go to a city-wide public school for kids who test poorly. Most of them have never been to a play before, or at least a professional production of one, and some of them, though living in New York City, have never even been in the vicinity of Times Square.

I guess we could have taken them directly to Stomp or Phantom of the Opera or some other long-running Broadway spectacle, and no one would have complained. Instead, we opted for Proof, a four-character play by a new young dramatist that plays tricks with time and memory. Our teenagers weren’t thrown a bit. Once they got over their shock about how white and

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old the audience around them was, they weren’t at all intimidated by what they saw, and had perceptions that were as incisive as any drama critic’s and tougher than most. Listening to these students, I was taken back to my own earliest exposure to the arts, the theater especially, back in the Washington of the 1950s and 1960s. Like me, they came to the theater with a whole set of expectations, a lot of questions, and a deep sense of wonder. They explained in great detail how long it took them to adjust to the conventions of stage acting, so different from what they’re used to on the various screens of their usual cultural life. And then they were hooked by the whole idea of theater: In the case of *Proof*, they were delighted to discover a simple joy such as the convention that Act I can end with a blackout, just after a single shocking line of dialogue has upended the entire dynamic of the play up to that point.

In all of this, they reminded me of me, when I was first discovering the theater as a child. But it was my good fortune, because of my parents and my relatively privileged economic circumstances, that I experienced these sensations when I was seven; they had to wait until they were around 10 years older, even though they, unlike me, lived in a cultural center, not a backwater.

This is unjust. I am not remotely worried that there will ever be a short supply of good and sometimes even great artists in this country; they just keep coming, no matter what our society does to discourage them or to make their lives difficult. Artists just happen; they are, if you will, God-given. Audiences, however, have to be created, and what’s amazing, and what we tend to forget, is that they can be created so easily. I was turned into an audience member at the National Theater in Washington when I was seven because my parents took me to see *Damn Yankees*, a show they’d thought I’d like because it was about my beloved home baseball team, the Washington Senators. The teenagers going to the theater with me were hooked because in this case a nonprofit organization, the Theater Development Fund, enlisted the help of commercial producers to expose students to a form of art that is not along their beaten path and whose cost of admission is prohibitively expensive. Will these students stop watching lousy movies, listening to empty music or trancing out to mediocre TV? Of course not. I might add that I didn’t stop doing any of those things either when I discovered the theater as a child. But every one of these students is potentially an audience not only for good theater but for the other arts.
We all know that arts education is in a sorry state in this country, and we all fight for its reinstatement in those school systems where it has been regarded as the most dispensable budgetary item in the curriculum. But with or without arts education, we must have arts exposure. Parents should do their part, but often don’t—affluent parents included. Without a large-scale effort to get kids access to the arts—whether through government programs or privately funded ones or both—it just won’t happen. And as part of this effort, and once again, we must pressure the powerful for-profit entertainment industry to ante up. If they’re not going to put ballet on television, or re-create the NBC Symphony Orchestra—and I dare say they are not, unless castaways from Survivor are among the soloists—then they are going to have to help enable the nation’s children to see America’s arts first-hand. They’re going to have to help provide the cultural nutrients to counter the cultural junk food they largely dish out.

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

The main point of exposing new generations to the best of American art is not, however, to assure a future for our existing arts institutions. The calling is greater than that.

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

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

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

As we begin the 21st century, I think we should spend less time worrying about the demise of culture, and more time worrying about how more Americans can be introduced to the wealth of culture we do have, and at a younger age, especially at a time when the commercial culture blasted out by the mass media is more rapacious than ever in pursuit of us, our children, and our leisure hours. State and local art agencies can play an enormous role in this, but it also must be a national mission. At that national level, this goal means a different kind of fight than the arts community has been used to in recent years—a fight with the mass media, not censorious zealots, indeed a fight with our cultured friends, not the usual rogue’s gallery of philistine enemies. It’s an idealistic fight that, if won, will not only benefit the arts community but the nation as a whole, and that fight can be won with—but also without—government help. I look forward to seeing you all at the barricades.