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What Is Wrong With the Arts?



By Michael Kaiser

It is no surprise to most of us that the arts are in a parlous state. But contrary to popular belief, it isn't the fault of unions, the absence of arts education in our schools, the lack of involvement by boards, or even a dearth of arts management training.

The arts are in trouble because there is simply not enough excellent art being created.

I know that I am risking the wrath of the entire arts community, and I know I am also at risk of sounding like the classic old-timer ("When I was a young man..."). But when I was a young man we had Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey and George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins. And I am just mentioning a few of the astonishing dance artists working in the 1950s and 1960s. We also had Bernstein and Rodgers and Stravinsky and Rubinstein and Horowitz and Tennessee Williams and...

Today, far more inventiveness can be found in popular entertainment than can be found in the classic arts. The embracing of new technologies and the willingness to try new things seems to have become more the province of rock music and movies than of opera, ballet and theater. We are losing the attention of Americans because we are not producing work that is new, fresh and daring. No wonder so many newspapers are no longer covering the serious arts.

The classical arts have simply not kept up. There is so little work that is new and daring. In an effort to build our audience base we have tried to substitute celebrity for excellence and bigger sets and costumes for insight and true beauty. Stunt casting may increase earned revenue but it doesn't help create a masterpiece. And a \$60 million musical, with whiz bang sets, is not necessarily better than a \$10 million musical with more modest sets and costumes.

True, we still have among us a few of the greats — Paul Taylor, Stephen Sondheim, etc. — who have been producing great art for many decades. But these geniuses cannot be the vanguard for a still young



Ratmansky among them — we need more. Where are the new brilliant voices that astonish, educate and entertain us?

Have we created and documented all we need of art? I don't think so. Is the world short on talent? No, again.

But the institutional nature of our arts ecology, a relatively recent phenomenon, means that groups of people are now more responsible for arts making than the individual. Boards, managers and producing consortia are overly-involved.

And these groups are misbehaving. They are overly-conservative, subject to "group think" and so worried about budgets that they forget that bad art hurts budgets far more than risk-taking does.

It is popular to bemoan the fact that young people spend too much time communicating vapid thoughts on Facebook or Twitter. I think this is unfair to younger people. We in responsible arts positions must give them something to talk about.



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