

INCUBATOR FOR NEW VOICES By Jon Palmer Claridge

In the waning days of spring last year, when the Cold War died and Art Wars glowed white hot, I quit churning out guidelines for John Frohnmayer's embattled National Endowment for the Arts to cross the 14th Street bridge into suburban Virginia—a gulf far greater in terms of audience development than the short hop across the Potomac River would imply. There I was to explore government-plus-arts arithmetic firsthand and try my luck at launching two new theatre spaces at Arlington's Gunston Arts Center—only four miles from the Washington Monument, in the shadow of the Kennedy Center. Gunston was a former middle school, renovated in the late '80s to create a splendid 450-seat proscenium stage from the old auditorium and a 130-seat "black box" from the shell of the school library.

The question was what direction should the new Gunston theatres take? I thought of Peter Sellars passionately quoting Flannery O'Connor in *American Theatre's* Jan. '85 issue, urging us to form a community's taste by exposing it to "a wider range of possibilities." Unfortunately, emerging artists (and spaces) are always at risk. Gunston, admittedly, was to function on a far smaller scale than Sellars' ill-fated American National Theatre at the Kennedy Center but, if you scratch a few zeros from the (im)balance sheet, the issues are the same. The answer seems obvious: Since space is Gunston's major asset, why not shop for performance companies and keep both stages active year-around? Couple this with symbiotic presenting and arts education programs and the taxpayer gets not only an artistic renaissance, but also more bang for the cultural buck (er—68 NEA cents).

But was there enough of an audience in Northern Virginia alone to support an alternative theatre? Or more accurately, four alternative theatres? If not, could we lure Washingtonians across the Potomac? After all, the economic slump of the past few years has been particularly tough on the small theatre scene. Like most major cities, Washington has a long history of small theatre closings.

But Arlington's local government chose to provide free space to keep its resident companies from being sucked

down an economic vortex. One of them, Signature Theatre, could gamble on a relatively unknown script for its inaugural production (Sally Nemeth's *Mill Fire*) precisely because no Snidely Whiplash landlord was waiting in the wings. The other companies reflect a deliberate programmatic mix: New Works Theatre (where double bills by Washington area playwrights played to full houses!); the fledgling Washington Shakespeare Company, presenting classics with creative simplicity; and Goosebump Theatre's contemporary feminist dramaturgy. Following the resident companies' seasons, Gunston's first summer featured two double bills of political drama, a 10-play festival of new European works, an original script laboratory, an actor-produced workshop and a concert rendering of a new musical.

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As with any new endeavor, there have been challenges. Those diehard theatregoers who first ventured across the river to Gunston were in the dark—literally. New parking spaces were still to be carved out—which prohibits the erection of outdoor lighting—so those ever-so-valuable new patrons looking for Gunston after dark had to hope for a harvest moon. And when Theatre Two opened last fall, National Public Radio commentator Bob Mondello cautioned potential audiences that in order to attend the Sartre play in production, you were forced to enter a driveway which read "WSC's No Exit," only to encounter another battered sign proclaiming "Exit Only" (a paradox, he noted, that Sartre "surely would approve").

Mondello became an early and vocal champion of the Gunston theatres' "savvy policies" and helped forge the media alliance so necessary

to build a lasting reputation. And WSC's initial success served as a springboard for a fruitful collaboration with an Arlington-based developer to produce free Shakespeare last spring. So despite impediments, a resilient audience keeps growing, lining up as in *Field of Dreams*, giving us a watchcry: "If you build it, they will come."

How, then, does this model nurture emerging voices? A theatre's partnership with local government, especially in tandem with forward-thinking business leaders, creates an enabling environment beneficial for all concerned: artists, taxpayers, the business community and the cultural mavens charged with nurturing a newly renovated facility. Other key elements add to the amalgam. Gunston's three rehearsal halls, two dance studios, costume and scene shops, and 2,000-garment costume collection give support to avocational performing arts groups. The resident companies maintain complete autonomy—each is responsible for its own funding, management, box office and marketing. With the major burden clearly on the theatres, the responsibility of the county government is merely to maintain facilities and provide technical and consulting services. This cooperative spirit, in turn, keeps ticket prices down—always a lure for new audiences. Playwright T.J. Edwards now calls Gunston the "little Kennedy Center on the other side of the river."

The experiment is still fragile. I'm convinced, however, that this approach is the key to the future and that Arlington is by no means unique; surely the number of municipalities able to provide similar "arts incubators" is vast. After all, in a field which is built on collaboration, it is precisely by creating new partnerships—which use space in lieu of cash—that we spawn theatres for the future. So throw down the gauntlet to your community leaders. And as far as the outlook for our companies at Gunston? Who knows what wonders might befall us now that they've finished the parking lot? □

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