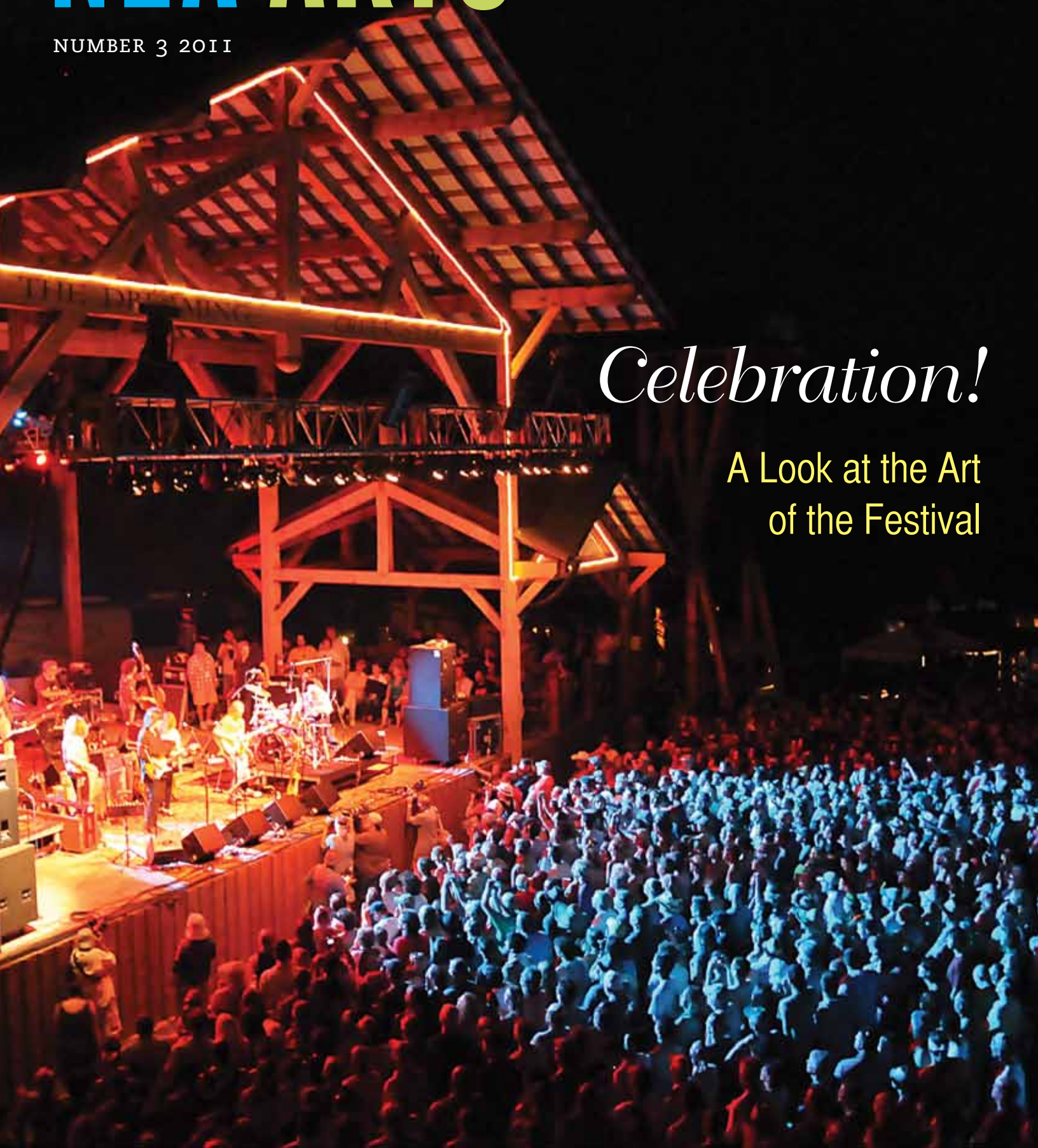


# NEA ARTS

NUMBER 3 2011

*Celebration!*

A Look at the Art  
of the Festival



# NEA ARTS

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## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

“This is who we are. Every year when I come to the festival I want to say, ‘City of Houston, look around you, this is who we are.’” In this quote from the NEA research report *Live from Your Neighborhood: A National Study of Outdoor Arts Festivals*, a volunteer was talking about the Houston International Festival, but he could have been talking about any arts festival. The report demonstrated that festivals are very important to local communities, providing a place where segments of the community that may not regularly interact can gather and celebrate together. Not only that, but festivals generate a sense of pride for local arts and culture. That’s not all that’s generated: festivals contribute to the local economies, stimulating local tourism industries.

The most important role the festivals play, though, may be how the festivals transform their communities. Both FloydFest and the Telluride Film Festival have changed sleepy towns into internationally renowned arts destinations. Atlanta’s National Black Arts Festival shows how a festival showcasing one ethnic group can elevate the city as a whole artistically, and the Berkshires—host to numerous theater and other festivals—demonstrates how place and community can support festivals as much as festivals support place and community. And festivals do support community, as Chicago’s Printers Row Lit Fest shows, where an unlikely festival (do people still read books?) helped to rejuvenate a dying neighborhood in the city.

Join us at [arts.gov](http://arts.gov) as well to find web-only stories (see back cover), and don’t forget to visit our Art Works blog to comment on this issue or to share information on arts in your community.

## ABOUT THE COVER

FloydFest’s Dreaming Creek Main Stage, constructed with the help of local Virginia timber framing companies, hosts an evening set by former Band member Levon Helm. PHOTO BY ROGER GUPTA

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# A Place Out of Time

*Virginia's FloydFest Is Where the Magic Pops*



BY MICHAEL GALLANT

“Floyd, Virginia is a *place out of time*,” said Kris Hodges, co-founder and producer of FloydFest, the epic, homegrown festival that blossoms in the small Blue Ridge Mountains community every July. “This town creates the opportunity for anything to happen, as long as it’s positive and sustainable. And the community supports the roots music scene indefinitely.”

It would have been difficult for Hodges—who created the five-day event a decade ago with his wife and festival director Erika Johnson—to have found more fertile soil in which to plant the couple’s dreams. Steeped in the traditional music and arts of the Appalachian Mountains and sustained by a steady flow of newcomers, Floyd is essentially a Mecca of Americana music, exhibiting an artistic vibrancy and diversity that serves as FloydFest’s creative lifeblood. In 2011 alone, the festival’s lineup ranged from Oakland hip-hop pioneer Lyrics Born to the second-line New Orleans funk of the Dirty Dozen Brass Band, from the classic blues of Taj Mahal to the mountain tunes of the Whitetop Mountain Band. Beyond the music, FloydFest further channels the unique vibe of its hometown, hosting a wide variety of local vendors, a Healing Arts Village, a family-themed Children’s Universe, and workshops for both kids and adults.

Enthusiastic concertgoers at the tenth anniversary of FloydFest in Floyd, Virginia.

PHOTO BY RUSS HELGREN

The story of FloydFest is inextricably tied to the grit and inspiration of its founders, as well as the identity of its namesake community. Here's what Hodges and Johnson had to say about their evolution as festival planners, the unique character of their hometown, and the process of creating one of the most diverse musical events in the United States.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING FLOYD

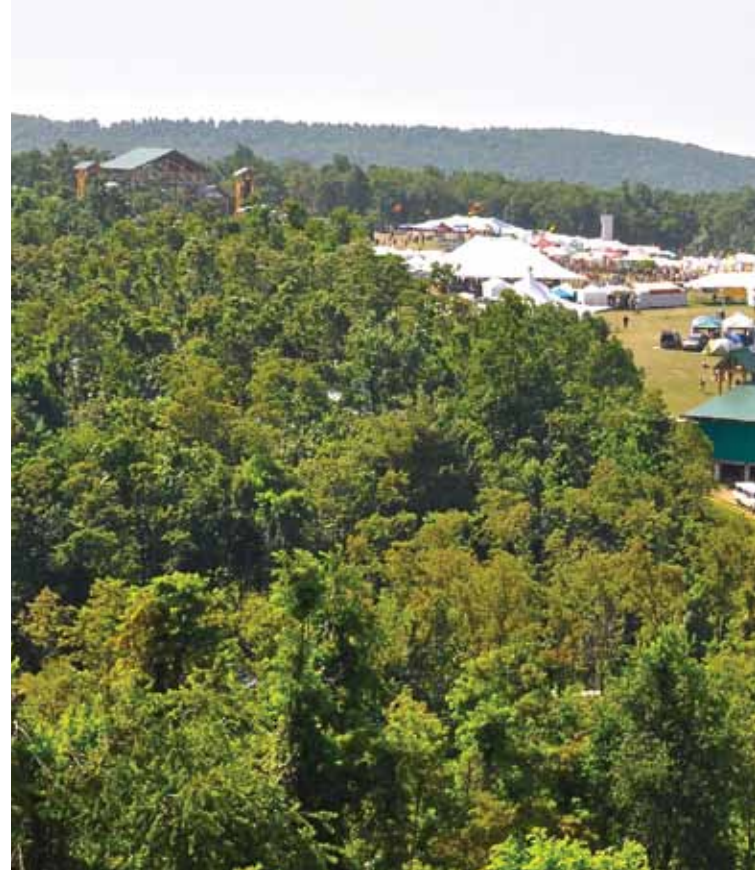
"Floyd represents a back-to-the-land appreciation of slowing down," described Hodges. "A lot of people from the north move here to get away from the rat race. The community supports people with fresh ideas on lifestyle and living. Since it was first settled, it has had such a strong foundation of creativity that it really affords the opportunity to create your own life."

For Johnson, the mixture of local farmers and indigenous artists with relative newcomers from Maryland, New York, and New Jersey creates a potent alchemy of tradition and open-mindedness. "With the Appalachian musicians, organic farmers, potters, timber framers, yurt makers, midwives, and even a doctor who does house calls and runs a barter clinic, you really do have a place out of time, where the outside world doesn't dictate how people live, think, or create," she said. "We pride ourselves on having a unique haven from the rest of the world. And we were able to take FloydFest into this mix and represent that."

Since FloydFest played its first note, Hodges and Johnson have been thrilled with the enthusiasm they've received from their Floydian brethren. "Community

**Local vendors include locally sourced food, regional jewelers, potters, woodworkers, clothiers, and fine artists.**

PHOTO BY RUSS HELGREN



support for this sort of thing is rare, but the people of Floyd jumped to support what we put together," said Hodges. "We had enough confidence to sell the idea to people, especially with the community aspect, and it caught on."

"It became a self-fulfilling prophecy in a great way," continued Johnson. "Most festivals don't have the town as a namesake, and we were already in deep. There are many artisans that were involved since the beginning, and the vibe of Floyd was just the right sort of eclectic fit for what we wanted to do."

### IN THE BEGINNING

The couple's journey toward FloydFest began not with an outdoor concert, but with a restaurant. "We owned a small place called the Oddfella's Cantina," noted Hodges. "Given the strong pull of Appalachian arts in this town, we focused on local cuisine and, of course, the local, traditional roots music." The Cantina quickly began hosting artists such as Norman Blake, and packing listeners in to capacity. "We decided we wanted a bigger stage," said Johnson.

Given Floyd's location off of the Blue Ridge Parkway, the couple hoped to funnel existing tourist traffic into their as-of-yet undiscovered festival venue, and an exploration of the road ensued. They discovered FloydFest's future home at mile marker



Hodges and Johnson transformed an unused cow pasture into a vibrant outdoor music venue, seen here from the nearby Blue Ridge Parkway. PHOTO BY RUSS HELGREN

170.5—an 80-acre, unused cow pasture with no infrastructure and no service road. After securing loans and permission to use the land, the planning of FloydFest truly began.

“That first year, we had a huge lineup, huge dreams, and huge money on the line—and a huge hurricane,” said Johnson. “It leveled the whole thing. It was hard trying to dig out and believe enough to forge ahead. But even that first year, as the hurricane was sweeping the festival site, volunteers and Floydians were pitching in and really helping us. That gave us a lot of fortitude to keep going. And that first year, FloydFest was still widely considered to be a huge artistic success, even with the hurricane.”

For Hodges, a sign that FloydFest had truly hit critical mass occurred at year three. “That was when a local timber frame company wanted to partner with us to build a massive timber frame main stage,” he said. “When that went up in the third year, that really said, ‘We’re here to stay.’”

### BY FAMILIES, FOR FAMILIES

“When we started our restaurant, we wanted to run an establishment where we would want to bring our children, and FloydFest is no different,” said Johnson.

“We have a Children’s Universe with play equipment and performances *for* children and *by* children. The fact that FloydFest is family-friendly is self-perpetuating, and it’s something we set out to do from the beginning.”

The safe, positive vibe of the festival was tested two years ago, when a site-wide power outage left FloydFest in the dark. “At the time, it was panic for us,” described Johnson. “We were afraid people would riot and loot. But as the electrical problem was being fixed, we looked around—musicians were playing acoustic music to appreciative audiences, bands onstage were still making music, and little acts had sprung up on the grounds around small, contained bonfires. People still hearken back to that as one of their favorite FloydFest experiences.”

### ROOTS AND RADARS

“It’s hard not to get caught up in the hype of popular music, but one thing that’s always lasted beyond fashionable trends is traditional roots music,” said Hodges, who programs acts for each year’s festival. “It’s been great to explore the ways roots music styles combine to create new sounds.”

Indeed, roots music has always been at the core of Hodges’ booking strategy. “I’ve had Taj Mahal, John

Scofield, Grace Potter, the Neville Brothers, and also bluegrass legends like Tony Rice and Del McCoury,” he recounted. “My booking isn’t dictated by who put out a new album. At its core, it’s what I like and what my audience likes, and what they request each year. Roots music has been central, but roots music can go anywhere,” he added.

In fact, Hodges put his philosophy into dramatic—and international—action for the festival’s first five years. “I went to West Africa to connect roots musicians there with roots musicians in Appalachia,” he said. “I learned a huge amount from the difficulties of bringing musicians over from Africa to perform in Floyd. But it laid the foundation of FloydFest representing truly diverse roots music.”

Though he captains the festival’s booking efforts, Hodges doesn’t go it alone. “We work with the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the Virginia Folklife Foundation out of Charlottesville,” he said. “They’ve helped us bring in traditional greats like the Whitetop Mountain Band and Maggie Ingram. Our people love the traditional arts, but they want a rockin’

show—authentic, non-hype music. Stylistically, it can be anything from jazz to blues to go-go to folk.”

In addition to their regular booking, FloydFest hosts a series called Under the Radar, which gives talented but undiscovered acts the opportunity to perform in front of the festival’s 15,000-person crowd. Audience members then vote on their favorite acts; the winner walks away with a cash prize, 25 hours at the local Blackwater Recording Studio, and, most important, a chance to play on the main stage at the following year’s festival. “For many years, I was a musician surviving off of my craft myself,” said Hodges. “So I’m proud to be able to support local and regional musicians with this series.”

Johnson believes that her husband’s own musical background helps him build a vibrant bill for FloydFest. “Believe it or not, having a festival that’s actually programmed by a musician is somewhat unique,” she said. “Kris isn’t stuck in any one genre and he appreciates every aspect of music.”

## TEN YEARS AND BEYOND

For Johnson, FloydFest is about creating a complete artistic experience. “We both believe that arts are deserving of a beautiful venue and beautiful setting, and that the background should be holistic. We like funky venues, homespun locations with creative, imaginative people making art in imaginative places. That’s where the magic pops.”

“Seeing all of our volunteers, musicians, and audience members come in to grow the festival each year,” added Hodges, “and gathering the post-festival comments we get from our partners and patrons, it’s easy to see the power that the arts give to people. It’s so important to us to support the arts, and there have been some incredible people who have supported us along the way.”

Looking back, Hodges sometimes marvels at the long, strange trip he and his wife have undertaken. “It took so much dedication building FloydFest over the last ten years, but we believed in it so strongly from the very beginning,” he says. “I try to convey that lesson to our children—if you can see it, you can be it, and you can make it happen. That’s a reality.” ▲

—Michael Gallant is a composer, musician, and writer living in New York City. He is the founder and CEO of Gallant Music ([gallantmusic.com](http://gallantmusic.com)).



A young FloydFest attendee enjoys a sprinkler-induced reprieve from the heat. From the first FloydFest, Johnson and Hodges have worked to make the festival safe and enjoyable for guests of all ages. PHOTO BY CHELSA YODER



# Small But Mighty

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## Celebrating the Movies at Colorado's Telluride Film Festival

ALL PHOTOS BY PAMELA GENTILE

Director Asghar Farhadi at the 2011 Telluride Film Festival for the showing of his film *A Separation*.

BY PAULETTE BEETE

### Opening Credits

Telluride Film Festival (TFF) should not be a success. For one thing, despite having paid for tickets well in advance, you don't learn which films are playing until opening day, and even then some slots remain "TBD." It's also quite a feat of travel to get to the box canyon in which the town of Telluride is inconveniently situated. And did I mention that one of the festival's ten venues is only accessible by ski lift? Yet for the 6,000 film lovers who attended the 38th annual event this year, this was all part of the charm; every single filmmaker, passholder, volunteer, and student braved Telluride for the simple joy of being shoulder-to-shoulder with people who love the movies as much as they do.

TFF was the brainchild of Stella and Bill Pence,

owners of the town's Sheridan Opera House, and James Card, who in 1973 was the chief curator of the motion picture collection at the George Eastman House. According to legend, Card remarked that the Sheridan would be a great place to screen films, and on August 30, 1974, the first Telluride Film Festival debuted, drawing a crowd of approximately 350 visitors and locals. With Pacific Film Archive curator Tom Luddy, they programmed 25 features and collections of short films that year, and presented three tributes—to silent film star Gloria Swanson, and directors Francis Ford Coppola and Leni Riefenstahl.

Today the format remains essentially the same: a slate of world or North American premieres, a program of vintage films, and three tributes, which in 2011 went to George Clooney, Tilda Swinton, and Pierre Étaix. The venerable film magazine *Sight and Sound* received the festival's Special Medallion. Since 1988, TFF has also invited a "guest director," an artist from any discipline who has a love of cinema—this year was Brazilian musician Caetano Veloso—to choose their own selection of festival films.

Many of the movies that premiere at TFF go on to be the darlings of the winter awards season. Buzz is already building around two films from this year's festival: Alexander Payne's *The Descendants*, and Michel Hazanavicius' *The Artist*, which according to *The Daily Beast*, "may be the first silent film to be nominated for the Best Picture Oscar since *The Patriot* in 1929."

TFF also offers educational opportunities for young people interested in film. The City Lights Project and Student Symposium grant high school and college students festival passes and special access to invited filmmakers and other guests. Film Lab, a partnership with the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television (UCLA-TFT), brings graduate-level film students to the festival to meet with industry professionals. Several screenings and guest artist talks are offered free-of-charge to allow Telluride locals to participate.

While it's easy to see why TFF—which received a Fiscal Year 2011 NEA grant—is one of the world's premiere film festivals, what makes people show up year after year, not knowing exactly what they're going to see or who is going to be there? I spoke with festival director Julie Huntsinger, filmmaker Justin Lerner, and festival volunteer Jeffrey Middents to find out.

## The Festival Director

When Julie Huntsinger joined Tom Luddy and Gary Meyer as one of the directors of the Telluride Film Festival in 2007, she was already a fan, having been one of the thousands of film lovers who had made the trek to Colorado for the event. She joined the festival after a career that comprised various roles in the film industry, including a stint working for Francis Ford Coppola. Below, Huntsinger discusses the festival.

### *Five words that describe Telluride Film Festival...*

"Intimate" is really an important word. "Pure" is a word that we are proud of that gets thrown around a lot. One of my favorite quotes about us was "small but mighty." There's a lot of passion and loyalty. The thing about the passion and loyalty is that it's in the workers as well as the guests. It permeates every single moment that you're there.

### *On what makes a film a Telluride film...*

We say it has to be extraordinary. It has to be just good. I think somebody was trying to use the indie label or the unusual or esoteric, or you know all of these really different words that don't fit because every time somebody will bring up an example of one of those films, we can have ten more that don't fit any of those labels.... Sometimes it will be irrefutably controversial...and sometimes people hate what we've just shown them. That's an okay reaction too. If it's gotten people really thinking, and it's very thought-provoking, then that's also high on our list of accomplishments. A very good film sometimes will make you extremely uncomfortable.

I feel like it really is alchemy because it's just me, Tom, and Gary watching movies and deciding what we want to show. And there's this balance that we often talk about. But we're merely reflecting the state of cinema.



*What's playing at Telluride this year? Shhh, it's a secret...*

[Keeping the films a secret] started out as a pragmatic exercise. In one of the early festivals, someone had committed to come and they weren't able to. There's nothing worse than saying something is going to happen and it doesn't. The fact that it bothers us as much as it does speaks more to who we are than anything else, because I think it's a fact of life for the rest of the world. So we said, "Let's say, 'Show up. We'll prove to you every year that it's worth it to get here, but we're just not going to tell you what's coming.'" We really go to great, great effort to keep the secret a secret. We've uninvited films in the past where the secret's got out too much because it's something that people really appreciate. It's part of the fun!

*On presenting vintage films as part of the festival...*

You can't really criticize or evaluate or appreciate film without having the understanding and knowledge of what has come before.... We show an older film and people say, "Well, everybody does that style of editing or that way of introducing a new character." We will say this was the first time that that was really happening. If you see the right ones, if you see the really good ones, you say, "No wonder people love this. No wonder this medium caught on the way it did."

**2011 Telluride tributee George Clooney (center) meets with UCLA graduate film students as part of the festival's Film Lab program.**



## *The value of volunteering...*

[Our staff] is between 15 to 20 year-rounders...and it swells to about 650 [people] by the time the festival is fully underway, and a huge percentage of that is volunteer. Many of them have been coming as long as the festival has been in existence. People love to work this festival.... It's a chance for folks to get together with old friends because they're so close, everybody who works on the festival. We have such good word of mouth that each year we have a whole new round of applicants. And we're seeing many kids of staffers coming back in good strong roles.



Actress Glenn Close discusses her new film *Albert Nobbs* with *Los Angeles Times* reporter John Horn during a guest artist talk at Telluride.

## *It could only happen at Telluride ...*

This year we had a film by Eryk Rocha called *Passerby*. He's Brazilian, and the film was in Portuguese.... The company in Brazil that was handling prints of the film sent Telluride the wrong print; it did not have English subtitles. For [Rocha], it was devastating—the moment in the film where the dialogue was supposed to be coming up in English at the bottom and it wasn't. He was beside himself....

We just kept showing it. It could have been this just awful moment. Nobody left. They stayed until the end and loved it. And then we had this funny little piece written in one of the [newspapers] saying, "That's how hardcore and dedicated Telluride is—they're not even going to put English subtitles."

I really think that people who love movies have a space in their heart, it's an extra chamber of emotion that you almost have to have to really love film. When you see a great movie, you're going through quite a few emotions. And so our audience is bound to be a special kind of audience. And I really think that you see that over and over again. I just wouldn't trade them for anything.

## *"Anybody can come to Telluride."*

It makes me honestly really sad when somebody will [ask], "Can anybody come to Telluride?" You don't have to be any [specific] career, job, socio-economic status. If you can even just get yourself to Telluride, sometimes you can go to the things that are in the library. You can go to the outdoor screenings. You can [attend] an individual screening or two. I do want anybody in the world that has a desire to come and celebrate film to come to Telluride and enjoy the festival.

## *That's a wrap...*

Cinema is an important art, and it's going to take work and effort to preserve quality cinema. We have to support the cinematic arts by doing things like coming to Telluride and supporting independent cinema in your community.... I don't think anybody wants to see [moviegoing] reduced to everybody looking at it on their computer screens alone. I think Joseph Campbell's idea of joyful participation in a community, looking at the arts together is incredibly important. There's something intangible about just sitting in a dark room. You can't replicate that at home. You really can't. ▲

—Visit us at [arts.gov](http://arts.gov) for part two of our story on the Telluride Film Festival—interviews with filmmaker Justin Lerner and longtime festival volunteer Jeffrey Middents.



A festival-goer enjoying the 2011 National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta, Georgia.

PHOTO BY SOPHIA BARRETT PHOTOGRAPHY

## A HOMEGROWN AFFAIR

# Atlanta's National Black Arts Festival

BY REBECCA GROSS

When Atlanta's first National Black Arts Festival (NBAF) was held in 1988, the city had no Tyler Perry or OutKast. Kenny Leon was just coming into prominence as the new artistic director of the Atlanta Alliance Theater Company, and Usher was just ten years old. While these individuals have today helped make the city a well-known nexus for African-American artists, back in the '80s, persistent racial tensions had left the black artistic community underfunded and underrepresented.

"There was really no place where African Americans could see themselves and celebrate the traditions of our own creative expression," said Dr. Michael Lomax. The current president of the United Negro College Fund, Lomax was the first director of Atlanta's Bureau of Cultural Affairs, which he said was "one of the few spaces in the '70s where black and white came together around a common purpose that had nothing to do with race." In 1978, he was elected to the Fulton County Commission—whose jurisdiction includes



**Sculptures at the international marketplace of the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta, Georgia.**

PHOTO BY SOPHIA BARRETT PHOTOGRAPHY

Atlanta—and formed the Fulton County Arts Council immediately after taking office. One of the council’s major initiatives became the launch of a local festival, an idea sparked by Lomax’s experience at Bumbershoot, a music and arts festival in Seattle. He wanted to galvanize Atlanta with the same enthusiasm and city pride generated by Bumbershoot, while simultaneously promoting the black artistic experience.

“We recognized that there was a kind of uneven growth in institutions,” Lomax said. “There were very few that really represented the African-American community.... [There was] a lot of energy, a lot of artistic vitality, but very little funding.”

The idea was to hold a biennial ten-day celebration of the African Diaspora. A number of different disciplines would be represented—film, literature, visual arts, music, dance, and theater—and events would be held at different sites throughout the city. There would also be a Living Legends award ceremony, which would honor individuals for their contribution to African-American art.

Although this strikes modern ears as entirely benign, the idea of a race-specific festival was initially considered controversial—even using the word “black” was disputed. “It was counter to everything that we did in the city, which was to usually mini-

mize the importance of race, to say, ‘We’re going to celebrate the arts through the artistic expression of people of African descent, and we’re going to call this unabashedly and unashamedly a black arts festival.’”

Despite early misgivings from some, the first festival, held in July 1988, was an unqualified success. Fifty thousand people were expected; more than 350,000 showed up. Cicely Tyson and Harry Belafonte served as the festival’s national spokespeople, Maya Angelou and Amiri Baraka were among the featured participants of the literary component, and a parade was held down Peachtree Street. What was envisioned as a regional festival had quickly taken on national prominence. “The unexpected outcome was that this touched a nerve, and people came from all across the country,” Lomax said.

Not only did it satisfy an unfulfilled need, but Lomax said it was an important step in changing the perception of Atlanta as an arts city. “A lot of these artists of that generation had been involved in marching with Dr. [Martin Luther] King. They certainly knew Atlanta, and they knew the South, but they knew it as a battleground for human rights,” he said. “They knew that the arts, certainly music, had played a powerful role in that liberation struggle. But I don’t think they really thought of the South as a place where they



A performance at the festival's Children's Education Village at Centennial Park.

PHOTO BY BRIAN L. CHRISTIAN  
PHOTOGRAPHY



Omar Sosa performs at the 2011 National Black Arts Festival.

PHOTO BY SOPHIA BARRETT PHOTOGRAPHY

could perform as artists for the sake of the art as opposed to for the sake of some social purpose.”

That notion is almost unimaginable today. The African-American art scene has exploded in Atlanta, particularly within the music industry. The city is home to Def Jam Recordings—the label of Jay-Z, Patti LaBelle, Kanye West, and Rihanna, among others—So So Def Recordings, LaFace Records, and Stankonia, the recording studio founded by OutKast. Then there’s the New African Grove Theatre Company, dance organizations such as Ballethnic Company, and the BronzeLens Film Festival of Atlanta.

According to Neil Barclay, current president and CEO of NBAF, this shift in Atlanta’s culture has allowed the festival to dramatically expand its scope. Whereas African Americans were once considered a “monolithic” demographic whose members had similar aesthetics, ideas, and backgrounds, today the community’s diversity is explored and celebrated. On last summer’s festival schedule, featured events included South African boot dancing, a Guinean *kora* harp band, Afro-Cuban jazz, and an international craft market. A revival of the 1936 production *Voodoo Macbeth* is currently in the works, thanks in part to a Fiscal Year 2010 NEA grant. The play takes place in 19th-century Haiti, and was originally produced under the WPA’s Federal Theater Project.

“Opportunity is before us to now begin to explore the complexity of what we used to think of as just

‘black’ artists,” said Barclay. “[The festival] is something that’s much more complex, and, I think, richer because of the influence of people from throughout the globe that live in our community.” The festival, in turn, is beginning to spread its own influence internationally: earlier this year, the mayor of Kumasi, a city in south central Ghana, announced plans for a new local festival modeled on NBAF. The Kumasi International Black Arts and Culture Festival will take place from November 11 through 27.

Although it has grown tremendously—the festival became an annual event in 2003, with an attendance of roughly 300,000 each year, and now has year-round events—the NBAF remains a home-grown affair. The organization does extensive community outreach, and heavily showcases the work of Atlanta artists at the summer festival. Since its inception, NBAF has helped nurture nascent talent as well, not only by offering exposure of young artists’ work, but occasionally through commissions. According to Barclay, artist Radcliffe Bailey, who grew up in Atlanta, received some of his earliest commissions from NBAF to create posters for the festival. This summer, Bailey’s solo exhibition, *Memory as Medicine*, could be seen at Atlanta’s High Museum of Art.

“It’s a great moment for the community,” said Barclay of Bailey’s artistic success. “To see a native son have that kind of visibility in the museum, but also to have seen his work come of age in that way has been particularly exciting. It’s like being able to see the fruits of your labor many years later.”

Barclay hopes that the festival will continue to inspire and nurture another generation of artists and art lovers. NBAF reaches 25,000 children each year, both through year-round programming and summer festival attendance. “To see [children] turned on to the transformative power of art is always exciting for me,” he said. “You imagine it’s the moment when they go ‘Oh wow, art!’ That’s something that they’ll hopefully make a part of their lives.”

No matter age, race, or background, Barclay hopes that attendees will take away “something extraordinary” from the festival. As for Michael Lomax, looking back at the thriving festival he helped create, he offered a simple, authoritative appraisal: “I think we did good.” ▲

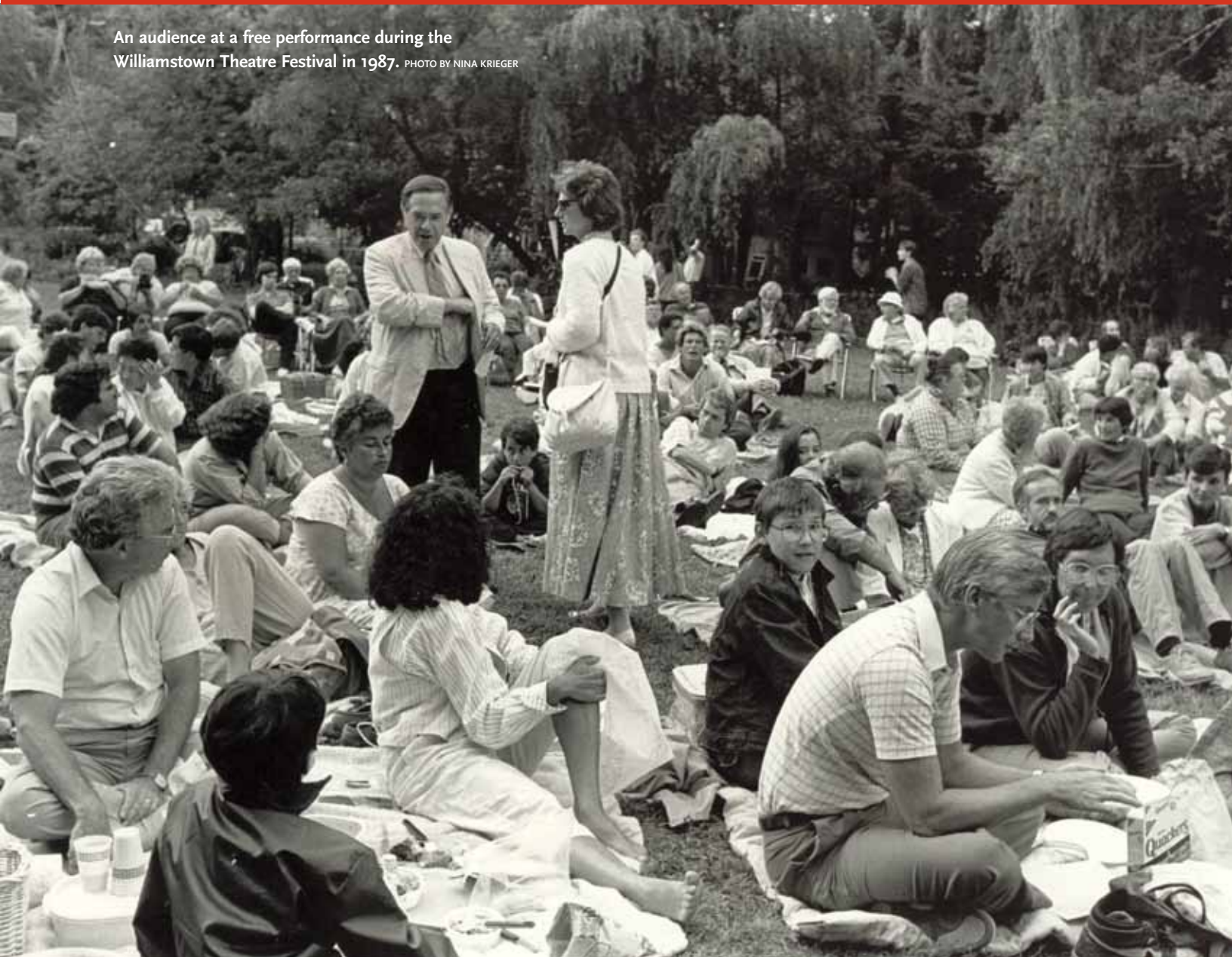
In the summer of 1850, David Dudley Field, Jr., an attorney and homeowner in Western Massachusetts' Berkshire County, arranged a picnic for notable authors and a handful of Berkshire citizens atop Monument Mountain near Great Barrington. That luncheon was said to have sparked the friendship between Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and convinced Melville to move to the Berkshires, where he would write one of the great

BY ADAM W. GREEN

# *The Community's the Thing*

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SUMMER THEATER FESTIVALS TO THE BERKSHIRES

An audience at a free performance during the Williamstown Theatre Festival in 1987. PHOTO BY NINA KRIEGER



American novels, *Moby-Dick*. This interplay between the Berkshires' communities and its great artistic tradition continues today, and perhaps nowhere more palpably than within the summer festivals of four major residential theaters: Berkshire Theatre Festival (BTF), Williamstown Theatre Festival, Shakespeare

and Company, and Barrington Stage Company (BSC).

By the local visitors bureau's estimate, 2.5 million tourists flock to this Western Massachusetts region annually—the large majority during the summer—and almost 60 percent of them attend performing arts productions. While the dance center Jacob's Pillow and the Boston Symphony Orchestra's retreat at Tanglewood have traditionally been a focal point for visitors, these four theaters' festivals, with their ambitious scheduling of dozens of plays, musicals, cabarets, children's fare, and touring shows from May to September, have become a large component of the region's cultural life. But beyond the appeal to the tourists, these festivals have enduring value to the 131,000 locals, whose communities are the major beneficiaries of their artistic, economic, and educational output. Barbara Allen, the Stockbridge Library archives curator, noted that, over the years, "The theaters became part of the community and the community became part of the theaters. And it fit in. Just as the writers fit in. It's that type of area."

While the spectrum of their offerings are wide, the underlying theme uniting the theaters is their integration into the communities. Rebecca Brooksher, an actress who's performed at both BSC and BTF summarized the relationship: "The theaters, along with the

## >> BERKSHIRE THEATRE FESTIVAL

The oldest of the four theaters dates back to 1928, two years after Walter Clark, a New York art gallery president, purchased the dilapidated Stockbridge Casino. Clark helped form a private group dedicated to the arts, moved the casino down Main Street, and reopened it as the Berkshire Playhouse. A New York actor and Yale graduate student was hired to run it, and with starlet Eva Le Gallienne gracing the inaugural summer season of the Playhouse, the theater was an immediate hit with locals. Now known as the Berkshire Theatre Group (having merged with Pittsfield's refurbished Colonial Theatre to produce year-round entertainment), it is one of the oldest professional regional theaters in the country. Its history boasts prominent designers and actors, such as Buster Keaton, Al Pacino, and Katharine Hepburn, its main theater is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and a second stage (the Unicorn) often hosts world premieres.

Paul Fitzgerald and Rebecca Brooksher in Berkshire Theatre Festival's 2011 production of *Period of Adjustment* by Tennessee Williams. PHOTO BY CHRISTY WRIGHT







Lili Taylor and Lily Rabe in a scene from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* at Williamstown Theatre Festival in 2011. PHOTO BY T. CHARLES ERICKSON

## >> WILLIAMSTOWN THEATRE FESTIVAL

Perhaps inspired by the success of South County's Tanglewood and Berkshire Playhouse, a group of businessmen and Williams College faculty members hatched a plan to start a summer theater festival partially to increase Northern Berkshire tourism. They prevailed upon the college president for use of the school's Adams Memorial Theatre, and the festival was born in 1954. The following year, Nikos Psacharopoulos—or just Nikos, as he was universally known—was at the helm, where he would remain for 33 years.

"Nikos never rested on his laurels," said Williamstown Film Festival Executive Director Steve Lawson. "Even after a very successful season, he would say, 'Yes, but next week we do something new and something big.'" Williamstown got bigger indeed; it now boasts a summer staff of more than 350 people, including performers, designers, directors, writers, technicians, interns, and apprentices. The festival moved to a new complex in 2005, three years after winning the Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre.

other cultural events in the area, are the community itself. I think it's why people choose the Berkshires over the Hamptons or Cape Cod. The community is made up of intelligent, cultured people. And it's the constant dialogue between the audience and the theaters that makes the area so exciting."

The region's economic vitality is a strong indicator of the theaters' import. Berkshire Creative, an organization that assists the creative sector, estimates that these theaters and the area's other major cultural institutions spend upwards of \$40 million on goods and services within Berkshire County, provide thousands of jobs, bring in millions of dollars in federal grants, and are a boon to the county's hospitality industry. In an anecdotal nod to how the arts can revitalize an economy, Julianne Boyd, a former artistic director at BTF, noted, "The arts are truly leading the economy in Pittsfield. When we moved here, it was a ghost town. Fifty stores opened in the last two years on North Street here."

This past summer, despite fears of a double-dip in the depressed economy, three of the four theaters

## >> SHAKESPEARE AND COMPANY

Nestled between Stockbridge and Williamstown is Lenox, where Edith Wharton's estate, the Mount, sprawls down the road from the town center. And it was at the Mount that Shakespeare and Company resided for 23 seasons before moving to its current Kemble Street location, which includes three performance spaces and ambitious plans to construct a space modeled after Shakespeare's Rose Playhouse. Company founder Tina Packer recalled that while meeting with her grant officer from the Ford Foundation in 1978, a "bloke came in the door who I thought was a plumber," and listened to her thoughts on forming a theater company. That 'bloke' turned out to be a real estate developer and former trade union leader named Mitch Berenson, who would later offer assistance and propose the Berkshires as an ideal place for the new company. Packer immediately warmed to the notion: "I wanted to see if a classical theater company could actually affect the community it lives in. I was much more interested in its social effect than being on Broadway."

reported ticket sale increases from 2010, with BSC announcing the most successful season in its history, topping \$1 million in individual ticket sales in addition to subscriptions and group sales. Meanwhile, Williamstown reported more than 40,000 audience members in 2011 from 44 states and various countries, contributing to a boost in hotel and restaurant business in the vicinity.

All four theaters run educational outreach programs, and their footprint speaks to how vital the theaters are to these towns. For Shakespeare and Company, its education programs are essential to its mission. Based for 23 seasons at the Mount, Edith Wharton's Lenox estate, the company was in search of a new home and in 2001 moved to its current Kemble Street location. According to Tina Packer, founder of the organization, "the principal reason we stayed in the Berkshires is we'd built up relationships with the whole school system." For more than two decades, the company's heralded Fall Festival has brought teaching artists to 500 students across ten schools in the county before presenting shows to the public in the days before Thanksgiving.

A collaboration between Shakespeare and Company and the Berkshire Juvenile Court resulted in Shakespeare in the Courts, which teaches juvenile offenders to explore scenes from the Bard's canon and learn personal values from the texts. Initiated in part with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the program has been praised and awarded on both a state and federal level.

Then there is Williamstown's Greylock Theatre Project, based on New York's 52nd Street Project, which works with North Adams children in the Greylock and Brayton Hill neighborhoods on theater activities. The theaters all run some form of youth theater as well, and BTF operates school residencies and touring performances that reach thousands of students each year. Barrington Stage Company's playwright mentoring project, an intensive, six-month, out-of-school activity for at-risk youth, received



Merritt Janson as Rosalind in Shakespeare & Company's 2011 production of *As You Like It*. PHOTO BY KEVIN SPRAGUE



The 2011 Barrington Stage Company production of the classic musical *Guys and Dolls*. PHOTO BY KEVIN SPRAGUE

a Coming Up Taller Award in 2007.

Barbara Allen, herself a resident for more than 30 years with two children as public school alumni, sees the theaters' education programs as crucial: "I will honestly say that with one of my daughters, Shakespeare and Company changed her life. All the credit in the world to S&Co's children's program."

Even beyond the artistic and educational ancillary benefits, the theaters are entwined in residents' very lives. Allen placed the connection of the theaters and community in a historical context. "You have no idea how many of the 70-, 80-, 90-year-olds in town, you get them talking, and they'll say 'Oh yes, I was an extra in such-and-such a play, or they used my dog in this play.'" Just this past season, Barrington Stage Company used a local church's gospel choir as the final punctuation in its civil rights play *The Best of Enemies*.

Though the festivals last for only a few months, the theaters themselves remain significant through-

## >> BARRINGTON STAGE COMPANY

The newest theater of the four, Barrington Stage Company, was founded in 1995 by Julianne Boyd, a former artistic director at BTF. First located in Sheffield, and now in a renovated vaudeville house in Pittsfield with a second stage nearby, BSC has already premiered a handful of works that have transferred to New York, including *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. Along with its smaller, intimate plays, BSC is also the most apt of the four theaters to stage musicals, and runs a musical theater incubator for new works, headed by lyricist/composer William Finn, which has produced seven world premieres and four workshops since 2006.

out the year. As Melville, Hawthorne, and numerous other writers of the 19th century became part of the communities, so too have these theaters become an essential part of each town's fabric. Returning to the very reason she agreed to found a theater in the Berkshires, Packer said, "My question was can a theater affect the community it lives in, and the answer is yes, absolutely." ▲

—Adam W. Green is an actor and writer living in New York City.

BY REBECCA GROSS | All photos by Glenn Kaupert, courtesy of the *Chicago Tribune*

# Reading in Sunshine

CHICAGO'S PRINTERS ROW LIT FEST



Talk to any technophile, and they'll tell you the same thing: books are for dinosaurs; newspapers are dead. Blog posts are the new literary essay, and the only sentences worth reading are those composed of 140 characters or less. If this were true, then a book festival, particularly one owned by a newspaper, is as culturally relevant as the VHS tape.

Yet the Printers Row Lit Fest, produced by the *Chicago Tribune*, has continued to grow, drawing 132,000 people, 200 authors, and 147 booksellers over the course of two days last summer. Next June will mark the festival's 27th year, capping off nearly three decades as one of Chicago's premier literary events.

Elizabeth Taylor is the literary editor at the *Tri-*

**The Printers Row Lit Fest spread out before historic Dearborn Station in Chicago.**

*bune*, and one of the festival's main organizers. While she says that "people are reading really differently" in the digital age, the allure of talking about books with people, not status updates, remains as present as ever. "In this world where everything's really atomized and people communicate online and rarely meet," Taylor said, "there's this place where people can come together in this kind of collective celebration of books, reading, ideas." The success of the festival, she thinks, is proof that "there is this hunger out there."

Of course, when the festival began in 1985, worries

about Kindles, iPads, and the loss of independent booksellers were far on the horizon. The event was first created by the Near South Planning Board, a neighborhood organization designed to promote its own corner of downtown Chicago. Printers Row, a historic district located along Dearborn Street just south of the Loop, was a neighborhood of particular focus. At that time, the massive factories and warehouses once responsible for printing books had become dilapidated relics of their turn-of-the-century heyday. The railroad tracks that cut through the neighborhood were abandoned, no longer needed for shipping tomes—or anything else for that matter.

Bette Cerf Hill, president of the Near South Planning Board in the 1980s, was at the forefront of revitalizing Printers Row. “My job was to get people to come to this part of town, which was considered dangerous,” she said. “But it was just empty. It wasn’t really dangerous. There was nothing going on there.”

An artist who has served on the Illinois Arts Council, Cerf Hill turned to art as a means of attracting people to the neighborhood. In 1981, the Near South Planning Board temporarily installed *The Dinner Party*, a large-scale sculpture by Judy Chicago, in an unused warehouse. Later, they established Sculpture Chicago, a six-week program that brought sculptors from all over the country to the city, provided them with sculpting materials, and gave them an opportunity to sculpt pre-approved designs.

“Everybody seems to have some gene, no matter how recessive, that responds to visual art, literature, creating things, doing things with your hands,” Cerf Hill said. “They may not respond to all of the various [disciplines], but one or the other of the arts seems to stop people in their tracks, capture their imagination, make them want to hang around or come back.”

With this in mind, what was originally called the Printers Row Book Fair was launched. Cerf Hill wanted to “bring books out in the sunshine,” which is quite literally what happened given that no vendor



**A flash mob dances to raise awareness for the *Chicago Tribune's* Make Your Mark literacy campaign.**

tents were used that first year. She hoped that the normally solitary act of reading would, for one weekend, become a catalyst for bringing the community together in its enthusiasm for the written word.

The festival was small that first year; booksellers with new and used wares took up less than a block. But there were authors reading from their work, music was piped in, and a special area was devoted to children’s books and writers. “I think the press was surprised that people considered this a fun event,” Cerf Hill said. “We were really early in the book fair thing.”

Although local authors were—and continue to be—the primary focus, the festival quickly began to attract internationally known names. Susan Sontag came. So did Ralph Ellison. The festival began to creep into adjoining blocks, and attendance rose. Though the festival “barely broke even,” a program called Authors in the Schools was started, which brought children’s writers into Chicago public schools to give writing workshops. “It was quite fantastic,” said Cerf Hill of the program, which is still run by the Near South Planning Board today.

By the 2000s, the not-for-profit realized that the festival had outgrown its organization. Cerf Hill had

A poetry reading at the Center Stage during the Printers Row Lit Fest.



done her job: people were coming to the neighborhood. Printers Row was beginning to gentrify, a development which she attributes at least partially to the fair. Today, many of the former printing warehouses have been converted into condominiums, and the area is appreciated for its proximity to the Loop. “I think people got tuned in and turned on to the fact that you could live downtown and it was fun and safe and there was a lot to do,” she said.

Meanwhile, the *Tribune* had been looking to develop a book fair akin to L.A.’s Festival of Books, run by its sister paper the *Los Angeles Times* since 1996. Hoping for the festival’s continued growth, the rights to the Printers Row Book Fair were sold to the *Tribune* in 2002. “They could promote it like no one else could afford to [do],” Cerf Hill said.

She was right. Today, the Printers Row Lit Fest, as renamed by the newspaper, offers two days of unusually creative, inventive programming. This past summer, there was the Spelling EEB, which challenged children to spell words backwards; Pitchapalooza, which allowed aspiring authors to try pitching their work to “book doctors”; and Lit After Dark, evening programming that included everything from zombie poetry readings to performances of pieces written by prisoners.

Taylor says the diversity of programs is necessary to appeal to the wide range of readers who attend the event. “One of the reasons I love [the festival] is that it’s probably one of the most diverse experiences I go to in the city,” she said. “You’ll see babies in strollers, older people with walkers and wheelchairs, and a wide range of people from different neighborhoods and different walks of life.”

Audience diversity extends to reading levels as well, and organizers are highly cognizant of the new and struggling readers who might be at the event. According to a literacy campaign sponsored by the *Tribune*, 53 percent of adults in Chicago have low or limited literacy skills. Last summer, a flash mob was held at the festival to highlight this issue, and visitors were encouraged to sign a “Make Your Mark” pledge to get the city reading. Festival partners include not-for-profit organizations such as Open Books, 826CHI, and the Chicago Public Library, each of which works to improve reading and writing skills of city residents.

Although illiteracy remains the festival’s most

prominent cause, the event has quietly influenced Chicago in other, more subtle ways. One is by promoting the city’s independent booksellers, who have struggled in the age of superstores. Another is by bringing together an annual collection of local authors, who, like visitors, are offered a unique chance to mingle with one another, share ideas, and glean new insights into their colleagues’ work. Taylor believes this final element is, quite literally, helping rewrite history.

“This is a great literary town,” she said, referring to a past that includes Saul Bellow, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lorraine Hansberry. “I think that events like the Printers Row Lit Fest keep redefining the literary history and legacy every year. By bringing writers together, they affect one another and the literature changes.”

Despite the many changes and continued expansion, the Lit Fest has managed to retain its community-oriented, hometown feel. Some vendors, like Sandmeyer’s Bookstore, have been there since the festival started. Cerf Hill still attends the event, nostalgic though it makes her. She says the festival’s essence is the same as it ever was: people strolling the streets, “celebrating the written word out in the sunshine.” ▲

An attendee of the 2011 Lit Fest browses the books.



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**Performers at the West African Griot Summit, part of the music festival Make Music New York.**

PHOTO BY MAGALI REGIS/FULA FLUTE MUSIC

