

SUNDAY, MARCH 20, 2005

# THE PLAIN DEALER

ARTS & LIFE

## Educating kids is the key to a region valuing culture

COLLEEN PORTER  
*Special to The Plain Dealer*

Not long ago, I stood in the back of the Ohio Theatre at Playhouse Square during a youth theater performance. The room was filled to capacity with 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds who were captivated as they watched a beloved story come to life in front of their eyes. The artists on stage had created a magical piece of theater that was smart, engaging and respectful of the opportunity to truly touch their audience.

Soon after that performance, the Education Department at Playhouse Square Center presented a residency with a company from the Netherlands. For two weeks, these international performers worked day and night with 27 local high school students. They created, rehearsed and performed an original piece on the stage of the State Theatre. On that snowy Saturday night in January, 600 people braved the elements to be a part of one of the freshest, most exciting performances any of

us had seen in a very long time.

And then, just a few weeks ago, I was again amazed as I attended Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo's awe-inspiring production of "La Belle." As a recent convert to ballet appreciation, this performance took my breath away with its ability to so clearly and beautifully tell a story. The pas de deux in the third act created a moment that the entire audience will carry with them forever.

Through each of these experiences, the value of participating in the arts was again made so completely clear to me. It is something that I know, that I believe, that I experience. It is something that I will continue. The challenge is how to bring others to that same experience.

A recent study by the Rand Corp. found that the key to gaining the wide range of individual and public benefits from involvement in the arts is to establish a "process of sustained involvement." The report suggests that by reaching children with quali-

ty arts opportunities when they are very young and providing access to continued opportunities, we will begin to increase demand for participation. That puts us on the path of building lifelong commitment to the arts.

Local arts organizations, foundations, school districts, corporations and individuals are constantly struggling with how to get on that path. We have all witnessed the transformative power of the arts and believe that our community can use the arts to achieve both individual and public benefits. We try to influence public opinion and, most importantly, public policy regarding the value of arts participation. Most days we feel we are preaching to the choir.

Our conversations are usually focused on arts education in the schools. Since the 1990s, practitioners in the arts have worked to encourage K-12 participation on the basis that the arts can improve a student's basic skills, capacity for creative thinking and overall academic performance.

Educators tell us that they believe the visual and performing arts have the ability to reach students of various learning styles. National studies point out that the arts "level the playing field" for students from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Parents and students tell us how deeply and positively their experiences in the arts affect their creativity and ways of understanding. Involvement in the arts can help us build the creative work force of the 21st century.

These arguments for participation have, thankfully, had some success in persuading school districts to continue to include the arts in the education of children. But they have not had the wholesale effect on policy that many of us had hoped. As school districts struggle with unbelievable economic challenges, the ability to provide regular, meaningful experiences in the arts for students grows increasingly difficult.

So how do we as community members follow this

path of building lifelong commitment to the arts?

First we must ask questions. What makes the arts special to each of us? How can we, as a community, discuss the unique experiences that the arts provide? How can that translate to public policy decisions?

Next we must plan, provide and support a multitude of quality arts opportunities for everyone.

And, finally, we must develop habits of participation in ourselves and pass those habits on to our young people.

Playhouse Square Center,

in partnership with WVIZ Channel 25 and WCPN FM/90.3, will take steps toward these goals by opening the state-of-the-art digital-broadcast and arts-education facility Idea Center at Playhouse Square in September.

If you are already a member of our passionate choir, thank you. Next time, bring a friend along. Show him or her something new.

If you are an artist, keep working. Show us new ways to think and see. Help us build new programming to reach new audiences. If we all think creatively, plan and

even take risks - in other words, act like artists - we will succeed in building a culture that recognizes the individual benefits of arts experiences and understands how that translates into public benefits.

If you are a parent, consider giving your children the opportunity to experience the arts: dance, live music, visual arts or the theater. Playhouse Square Center and many other arts organizations offer free educational programs and sometimes performances.

If you are someone who thinks the arts have nothing

to offer you, I challenge you to try them anyway. You might be surprised as you sit in the theater, among hundreds of others, to witness one of those breathtaking moments. And then you, too, will know and believe in the value of the arts.

---

*Colleen Porter is the director of education at Playhouse Square Center. Her department reaches more than 100,000 children and adults annually.*

© 2005 *The Plain Dealer*.  
Used with permission.