



# World-class arts can thrive in Delaware, expert says

BY BETSY PRICE • The News Journal • March 17, 2010

Delaware might be squeezed amidst the bright lights of Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York City, but that's no reason it can't have world-class arts, the president of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts said Tuesday.

"I believe every arts organization has an obligation to make its work interesting, exciting and important," Michael Kaiser told Delaware arts administrators and supporters.

Heralded as a turnaround artist who saved the Alvin Ailey dance troupe, American Ballet Theatre and Royal Opera House in London from bankruptcy, Kaiser is on a 50-state "Arts in Crisis" tour designed to bring high-level marketing experience across the country. More than 200 people showed up at the baby grand in Wilmington for his talk, which has been averaging 100 to 125 attendees in other places.

Kaiser pointed to the Glimmerglass Opera, a Cooperstown, N.Y., company that began in a high school gym when a man there wanted to stage operas. Glimmerglass' work is now considered so cutting-edge and important that opera directors from around the world work there. The town of 2,500 eventually built a new opera house on a farm outside town.

"If you can have world-class arts in a cornfield, you can have world-class arts in Delaware," Kaiser said.

Part motivational speaker, part marketing mentor, Kaiser urged the arts groups to pick meaningful projects a few years out, find the right partnerships and funding to make the projects great, and to promote their institutions and the good they do before promoting specific programs or asking for money.

His presentation left the crowd energized, upbeat and happily chattering away as members walked away.

Among Kaiser's points:

- Cutting programming is not an option, because it's the programming that brings in interest from the board and from the public. That interest turns into donations and support, which helps create more great programming, and becomes a cycle of success.

"If you're doing less work and you're doing less marketing, you're not going to compete well," he said.

At the Kansas City Ballet, a small organization, he plugged his ballet on television shows, produced a little-known work by George Balanchine to national acclaim, took the company on a New York City tour, and organized a fundraiser in a newly renovated private home he knew would draw people he wanted to talk to.

- More tickets are sold to arts events in the United States than to sporting events, but the arts are pricing themselves out of range for the average person.

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Two tickets to a Metropolitan Opera performance can be \$700, he said. With \$700, a consumer can buy a computer and watch opera star Leontyne Price on YouTube forever, he pointed out.

But the arts face some interesting problems. They can't increase efficiency or production. You don't play Shakespeare or Bach any faster this year than last. Tickets are based on the number of seats available, which doesn't change from year to year. And that means there's no place to absorb rising costs, except to raise ticket prices.

"If we're going to make the case that what we're doing is so important, we're going to have to rethink how we price our tickets," he said.

•Minority groups must begin looking for individual donors. Among white arts organizations, 65 percent of donations come from individuals. Among African-American organizations, only 5 percent does. The rest comes from corporate or government grants and money.

"One of my missions in life is to get African-American organizations to explore private donations," he said.

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