

commentary

Run, Baby, Run!

Why America's theatre artists should get themselves on the ballot

America is a work in progress and it desperately needs a rewrite.

It's time for theatre artists and professionals of all stripe and inclination to seriously consider running for local office. The sooner the better.

Why now? Here are three compelling reasons:

- We live and work under the protection of the First Amendment, and so we have a calling to celebrate freedom of expression and a special responsibility to defend it when it comes under attack. Not only is the First Amendment in trouble today, but a host of other assaults on creativity loom large in 2004. Just look at the erosion of church and state that threatens public education, scientific research and the teaching of science in America.

- We lost the first round of culture wars. Remember the nasty headlines, the law suits, the constant sludge of hate speech against artists and "tax-funded obscenity" from the far right in the early-to-mid 1990s? The arts in America lost ground as a result of those attacks.

Arts councils across the country felt the sting of huge (and in some cases, total) cuts post-Sept. 11 as states reeled under budget deficits and unfunded federal mandates. Worse, the far right succeeded in electing officials at all levels of government who are, at best, indifferent to the agendas of America's arts and theatre industries.

- America needs you.

Here's the logic behind reason number three. Creativity is an essential and irreplaceable element of the American character. Our ability to invent new ideas, things and ways of relating to one another has been the engine that created our country and that drives our economic and spiritual well-being.

The establishment of America was a creative act. The Declaration of Independence was a profoundly innovative document that helped spark the public's imagination and gave life to a revolutionary idea. The public readings of the Declaration across the 13 colonies in 1776 were kinds of civic performance that helped turn those colonies

into the United States of America in the minds of listeners.

Creativity and the passion to pursue the dreams released by one's creativity lie at the heart of America's success as a nation and as a people.

America's creative class—artists, cultural workers, writers, software developers, inventors, change agents, community organizers and others who live to create new visions, products and solutions—add immeasurable value to the American fabric of life as well as to its economy.

Taken together, our creativity-based industries produced \$960 billion in revenue in America in 1999. More than 38 million Americans work in the industries that comprise what has been called the Creative Economy.

The Creative Economy is where the action is for post-industrial, post-service and post-modern societies. This is where the most value will be created and the highest-paying jobs will be. It's also where the fun is. And it's projected to grow by a 4.8-percent compound annual growth rate through 2007.

In a sense, creativity is an energy source, a source that lies inside every individual and that is renewable and endless—like sunlight. In fact, creativity is the one energy source that is non-polluting, available everywhere and exists in inexhaustible abundance.

Only by unleashing American ingenuity and the drive to create will we find the path to continued prosperity and economic security.

We don't know where the next Steve Jobs, Jimi Hendrix, Jonas Salk, Jane Addams or Cesar Chavez will come from. Who will be the next pioneers and innovators whose work will immeasurably enrich the national life? If we want to increase the likelihood that they will be American-born or American-based, we need to think creatively about how to nourish, maximize and accelerate creativity here.

Every person has something precious and important to offer our community and our economy. Great ideas don't respect skin color, religious preference, sexual orientation or economic circumstance. If we, as a nation, restrict opportunity and access to resources

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to certain people because of some pre-conceived prejudice, then we risk losing the ideas and creations those people might generate.

The American creed might be stated as: "We don't care where you came from, who your parents were, who you sleep with or what color you are or what you had for breakfast—we just want to know what's in your head and what's in your heart. If we like it, we try it—and if we buy into it, we'll take it and run with it."

As theatre artists, you live this creed every day.

As candidates for local office, and then as successful elected officials, you would inject this mind-set, this set of values into your public function—you would be blending your private role as a creative being with your public role as a leader.

Here's how I see your experience and talents as artists and theatre-makers benefiting the public arena:

You know how to think outside the box and how to challenge assumptions;

You know how to create ensembles and high-performance teams;

You know how to use resources wisely, creatively and effectively;

You know how to assume the perspective of the other

and to emphasize with outsider viewpoints;

You know how to create beauty and new things;

You are essentially an optimist and an idealist.

Call me crazy, but that list looks like a list of "must haves" for any civic leader today. So, what do you say? Will you stand up for a creative America? It's not for everyone, but it may be for you.

Consider running for office in 2006. **AT**

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Tom Tresser is the lead organizer for the Creative America Project (www.creativeamerica.us) and creator of the Chicago Young Playwrights Festival, now in its 19th season. Sources for this article include John Howkins's *The Creative Economy: How People Make Money from Ideas* (Penguin UK, 2001); Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (Basic Books, 2002); and publications by PricewaterhouseCoopers (www.materiallogic.com and www.pwcglobal.com) and the United Nations Population Division (www.un.org).

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