

STP&A conference

Panel discussion on:

America's Cultural Land of Promise: Beyond Elitism and Populism

Baltimore, Friday, October 17, 2008

It is a privilege to have the opportunity to welcome you all to a conversation this morning that I would like to have with every one of you on a one to one basis—leading thinkers and actors in the cultural realm who gather each year to ponder the complexities and contradictions of our world writ large and our particular world—the realm of the intellect and the imagination. . We have a distinguished panel of leaders to help us think through the realities of the cultural life of this nation and perchance to dream—to dream about what it might be—and how we can help to transform “what might be” into tomorrow’s reality.

When Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian lawyer and human rights activist accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003, she had this to say, “The challenge facing us today is to think like dreamers but act in a pragmatic manner. And let us remember that many of humanity’s accomplishments began as dreams.”

For those of us in the arts and humanities that’s no surprise. The imagination is our stock in trade. But we are challenged every day to make things work—creating, producing, administering, advocating in a society that notwithstanding our reputation as philistines, and our government’s rather puny support of our cultural life, we have enriched the world enormously with our talent.

Today we will look at what I see as a significant breakthrough-- in what I call, for lack of a better name, the Peter Gelb Principle. Putting the name aside, do you know what I mean? That is, Peter Gelb’s getting the treasures of the Metropolitan Opera to millions on people in this country at a reasonable cost—that is, reasonable to the audience, not to the company. His swift and courageous move has prompted other opera companies and other performing groups and other cultural institutions to think outside the box—perchance to dream.

What are the implications of this trend for the cultural life of this nation?

In our discussion we will focus on how serious a trend it is, and if it is serious, how we in the field can strengthen it, and what its implications are for creating a new public policy for culture in America, giving it a more secure place within the realm of public policy.

As we will be electing a new president next month—I think you might have noticed that—we’ll even dare to make some suggestions for the new president on how best to enhance the cultural life of this nation by its actions, as the creators and administrators and advocates are truly reaching beyond elitism and populism into a new day—when the best is available to the most.

We'll start by mining the wisdom of the panel and then move to bring in the wisdom of the whole.