



Arts Under Attack

The Baltimore Opera Company is gone and other institutions are struggling to survive.

By John Lewis and Evan Serpick

A new display turned up at the Walters Art Museum this March. It wasn't fashioned around an Egyptian artifact or some newly acquired piece of medieval weaponry. Rather, it was part of a grassroots advocacy campaign concerning arts funding.

Placed prominently in the museum's lobby, it consisted of a table, pencils and pens, and postcards. Instructions were posted: "Spend 27 cents to mail a postcard. Prevent \$6 million

in cuts to the Maryland State Arts Council Budget. Do it now." Conceived by Maryland Citizens for the Arts (MCA), a nonprofit advocacy group, it communicated a sense of urgency as the faltering economy took its toll on the local arts community.

It's yet another sign that Baltimore's arts institutions are in crisis. MCA Chair Doug Mann ticks off the various ways they have been battered: "Tickets sales are down, contributions from individuals are down, corporate contributions are down, foundation giving is down, and those lucky enough to have endowments have been hit hard by the stock market—they're down 30 to 40 percent."

Compounding matters, in early April, the state legislature passed a 2010 budget that reduces state funding for the arts by 18 percent, from \$16.6 million to \$13.6 million, though it averted Governor Martin O'Malley's proposed 36 percent cut, which Mann said would be "devastating."

"This is a very stressful time for everybody," says Baltimore Choral Arts Director Tom Hall. "When you have the triple or quadruple whammy of nobody having any funds to help out, and fewer individuals feeling like they can make the expenditure of attending performances and exhibitions, it gets tough." Indeed, a recent Gallup Poll reported that more than 70 percent of Americans are cutting back on entertainment spending.

The fallout has already been substantial. The Baltimore Opera Company folded in March, leaving the city without a grand opera company for the first time in nearly six decades. Smaller organizations are on the bubble. Baltimore Chamber Orchestra cancelled its final two shows of its season, replacing them with smaller-scale shows. The Baltimore Theatre Project has hinted that it might have to shut down entirely. And almost across the board, there have been layoffs, furloughs, and salary reductions.

"Mostly what arts groups spend money on is people," says Mann. "That's really the only place they can save money. They run

efficient operations to begin with. Much of their staff works for modest salaries because they're passionate about the art."

Though considered healthy, the Walters, BSO, Centerstage, and Baltimore Museum of Art have taken major hits, and all four have implemented cost cutting measures. "No one is immune," says BSO Music Director Marin Alsop. "We've had to regroup, assess what's going on, and be as preemptive as possible."

The Symphony and the Walters trimmed office staff and retooled programming, and Centerstage has undertaken similar measures. Its production of Tony Kushner's *Caroline, or Change* was reportedly mounted without understudies to save cash, and some administrative staffers have worked without pay.

Funding cuts are forcing the Baltimore Office of Promotion & the Arts (BOPA) to scale back this year's Artscape. The festival's budget has been cut 25 percent, to \$750,000. BOPA Executive Director Bill Gilmore says there will be fewer national acts on the bill. The Saturn Stage—which was sponsored by the troubled carmaker and has hosted Joan Jett and Rusted Root—is a likely casualty.

The Walters and Baltimore Museum of Art continue to offer free admission—which they've done since 2006—but now charge for some exhibitions generated in-house, not just expensive traveling blockbusters.

On a recent Saturday at the Walters, a couple from Carroll County approached the information counter and asked about the Saint John's Bible show—which cost eight dollars. "We thought it was free," they said in unison. When told it was necessary to charge for such shows, they moaned a bit, but reached for their wallets and paid the admission.

Then, they spotted the MCA display, filled out two postcards, and went inside.

THE SCENARIO AT THE WALTERS ILLUSTRATES how the current crisis, besides threatening the existence of various groups, could adversely affect the long-term relationship between arts institutions and the public. In some cases, it's taken decades to earn the public's confidence, and observers speculate about profound and protracted backsliding. "We know this recession will not last forever," says Mann, "but these kind of cuts could have

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a permanent impact on many arts groups."

Hall says that when museums change ticket policies or orchestras cancel shows, it erodes the relationship between artists and patrons. "It's difficult enough under normal circumstances to cultivate and sustain a trust between an organization and an audience," he says. "And it becomes considerably more difficult if the organization has to essentially renege on a promise that they made a year ago. When you buy a ticket to the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra then all of a sudden, you don't have an event to attend, how inclined are you going to be to buy a ticket next time?"

"I'm especially worried about the Symphony," says Fred Lazarus, president of the Maryland Institute College of Art. "[The BSO] has done a great job in the last couple of years of coming out of a real difficult period, but how fast they dip back into real troubles again, I think, is really scary."

The BSO has, indeed, weathered tough circumstances, both financial and administrative, in the not-so-distant past. It's over-

come budget deficits, thorny contract negotiations, and a turbulent search process that brought Alsop to town. But since Alsop arrived, the orchestra has not only steadied its course, it's embarked on ambitious projects in the concert hall and in the community. Most seats at the Meyerhoff now cost just

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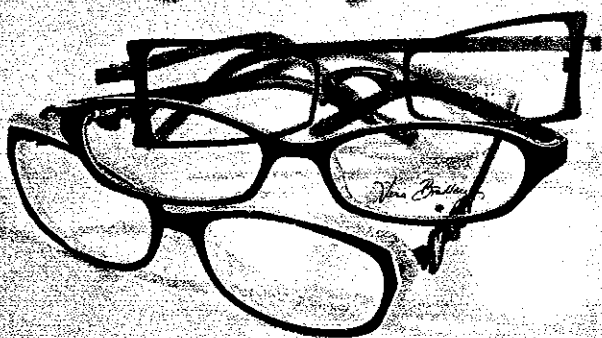
\$25, with unreserved seats going for \$20; concert programming has a new emphasis on contemporary American music and multimedia shows; Alsop has spearheaded outreach activities, such as the OrchKids education program; and the BSO has made inroads into the D.C. market with a second concert

hall, Strathmore, in Montgomery County.

Alsop concedes it will be a challenge to keep momentum going in the current economic climate, but she sounds undeterred. "We've put some pie in the sky things on the backburner for a little while," she says, "but I don't think we've had to make any major concessions. . . . We now have a couple years of sound and strong fiscal management behind us, so we're able to weather the storm, I hope. It was really important to me that we not raise ticket prices, because that has enabled a lot of people to access the symphony for the first time. We don't make our bottom line through ticket sales anyway. Never have. We're dependent on the generosity of our community."

Walters director Gary Vikan is in a similar position. After completing an extensive \$24 million renovation in 2001, the museum expanded its membership base and diversified its curatorial vision by partnering with other institutions. But besides the recent staff cuts, the Walters has scaled back its hours (Hackerman House is no longer open week-

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days) and canceled a 2010 exhibition it was producing with the Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

"It's hard sustaining momentum," says Vikan. "We restructured, and I have a pretty clear image of getting through this."

Vikan stresses that establishing a sense of stability and identifying areas for growth are important not only for the public, but also for museum staff. "I think it's very destructive to a staff to be continually anxious that the next morning's newspaper will bring news that will cause yet another problem," he says. "I've been at this for 15 years, and I've learned some things. I think we did it pretty well this time."

He says it's also important that institutions not spend all of their energy on financial matters, but remain committed to their mission. "We've been given a lot of Asian and pre-Columbian art. As we imagine coming out of this, we can address how we're going to present that material. We need to do it within the parameters of what we can afford. But we can't just give up and roll over."

STILL, THE PROSPECT OF A PROLONGED RECESSION looms large.

Fred Lazarus worries the current downturn threatens the city's hard-won stature as an emerging arts and culture leader. "One of Baltimore's great strengths is that it has always been able to perform better than its resources, in terms of its cultural community," says Lazarus. "In terms of the corporate headquarters here, the financial strength of the city, and lots of other things, we don't have lots of the resources that other cities have. We have a real chance of losing that leadership."

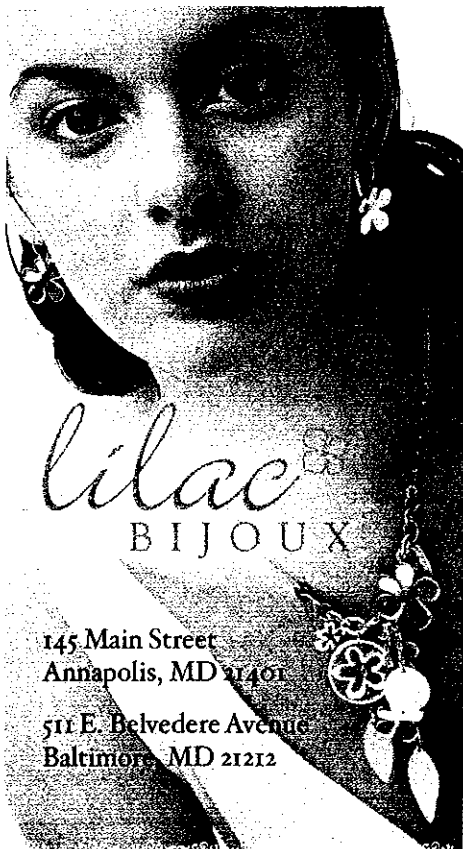
There are signs of the local community rallying around the beleaguered arts institutions. Doug Mann reports that public involvement in the postcard campaign has been overwhelming and that 400 people traveled to Annapolis to mark Maryland Arts Day by protesting the proposed budget cuts. On April 6, public radio station WYPR launched a series of two-week on-air campaigns, urging listeners to support institutions including the BSO, the Walters, and Everyman Theater.

Also, some federal assistance is on the way. The 2009 Omnibus Appropriations Act, signed by President Obama, includes a \$10 million increase in funding for both the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The bill also upped the budget for Arts in Education programs at the Department of Education. An additional \$50 million for the NEA was included in the stimulus bill.

Still, Lazarus remains "very concerned, not just for where we are today, but for where we could be in 18 months."

"I think the strength of our institutions will see them through," says Theresa Colvin, executive director of the Maryland State Arts Council, which administers the state's arts budget. "It will be difficult if this recession goes on for a long period. In six months, if it's still unstable, it'll be a different story to be written." ■

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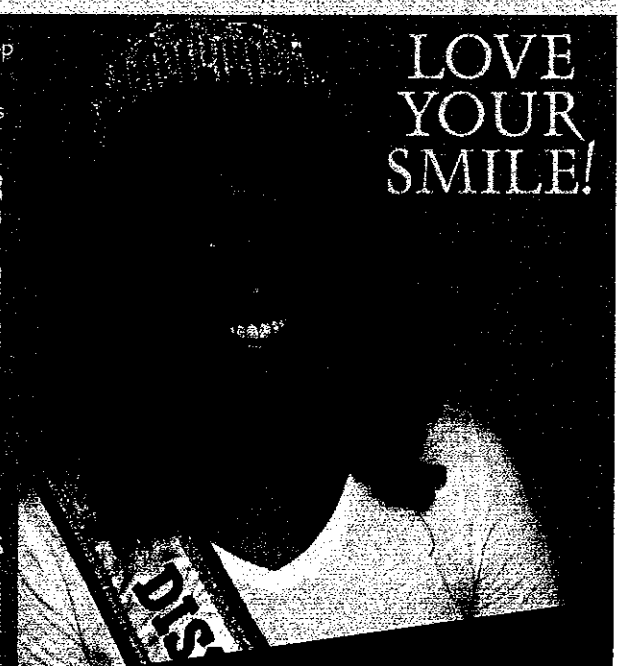
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