

Cover story - Cultural Affairs - 25 years of art, music and festivals on a shoestring

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PROVIDENCE - Tomorrow night, when the Providence Parks Department kicks off its annual summer concert series at Waterplace Park, the event will mark more than just the start of another season of multicultural music-making at the foot of the Rhode Island State House.

The evening's performances, by the John Allmark Big Band with guest vocalists Clay Osborne and Shawnn Monteiro, will also mark the 25th anniversary of the Parks Department's Office of Cultural Affairs.

Why celebrate the silver anniversary of a municipal agency?

Let's just say that if you've ever listened to music under the stars in a Providence park, or stopped to admire one of the sculptures that appear each summer as part of the city's popular Convergence arts festival, or enjoyed the Zen-like calm of Barnaby Evans's WaterFire, chances are you owe a debt of thanks to the Office of Cultural Affairs.

"They've really had a huge impact," says sculptor Jay Coogan. "When you think of all the things they've done, from concerts at Roger Williams Park to the waterfront festivals at India Point to Convergence and all of its spinoffs, it's pretty remarkable."

Of course Coogan, who also happens to be dean of fine arts at the Rhode Island School of Design, may not be the most impartial observer.

Back in 1991, the cultural affairs office, known affectionately as the OCA, gave him a small grant to design a floating sculpture for one of the ponds in Roger Williams Park. The result was Deep Water, a flock of styrofoam fedoras that debuted as part of Convergence IV.

Since then, the floppy-brimmed hats have become a recurring motif in Coogan's work, including a recent commission for Fidelity Investments in Smithfield.

"That [Deep Water] was really the beginning of a whole series of work for me," he says. "Without the OCA's support, it might never have happened."

Other artists tell similar stories.

Dancer Dominique Alfandre of Newport's Island Moving Company recalls her first performance at Roger Williams Park's Temple to Music.

"It was a magical day," she says. "It was our first outdoor performance, so there were more than a few jitters, especially when we saw how big the crowd was. But it was also great to be able to dance for people who may never have seen a live dance performance before."

Jazz bassist Ben Allison, meanwhile, began a long-term collaboration with West African musician Mamadou Diabate after the two were introduced by cultural affairs director Bob Rizzo.

"That's one of the great things about Bob," says Allison. "He has a knack for helping artists and performers connect with each other and with the audience."

Rich in activities

Forging connections between artists and audiences has been a hallmark of the Office of Cultural Affairs from the beginning.

Founded in 1976 as a way to bring people back to Roger Williams Park, the OCA now oversees a wide range of activities, from music and theater performances to outdoor sculpture displays to the current Pied Piper of cultural tourism: a film festival.

In addition, the office is responsible for maintaining two of the city's prime venues for public art: Waterplace Park and

the Providence riverwalk.

That's a tall order for any city agency. Yet the OCA fills it with just two full-time staffers: Rizzo and associate director Lynne McCormack.

How do they do it?

"I must ask myself that question at least 10 times a day," Rizzo says with a laugh. "Every year it's a struggle, but every year we manage to get it done. I guess we're used to it by now."

An affable, frizzy-haired man who is also an accomplished sculptor, Rizzo exemplifies the Cultural Affairs hands-on approach.

During the spring and summer, he spends much of his time overseeing the latest crop of Convergence sculptures, many of which require special care and handling despite weighing hundreds of pounds. Cold-weather months are spent lining up new talent for next year's events.

Another concern for Rizzo, McCormack and the agency's two part-timers youth program administrator Christine Donilon and production coordinator Tina Juul is finding ways to supplement the agency's bare-bones (\$70,000) programming budget.

One way is through CapitolArts Providence, a nonprofit organization that raises money for a number of arts events, including its own. Another is through private sponsors such as BankRI and radio stations WSNE and WHJJ, all of which contributed to this year's 25th- anniversary concert series.

Combined with hard work and an experienced staff, such contributions allow the OCA to have an impact far beyond its small size and budget.

"We've worked with Bob, Lynne and the rest of the Cultural Affairs people for a long time, and they're great," says Tom Silvia, director of tourism for the Providence Warwick Convention & Visitors Bureau. "Just look what they've done with Convergence. It started within Roger Williams Park. Then it moved to downtown. Now it's statewide."

Back to the park

Needless to say, the agency's goals were much more modest back in 1976. Then its mission was simply to bring more people, especially families, into Roger Williams Park.

"At the time, the park was pretty run-down," says Craig Watson, a theater manager for Connecticut's Hartford Stage Company who became the OCA's first director. "Basically, it was a place where teenagers came to polish their cars on Sundays."

Watson, now literary manager for Trinity Repertory Company, began by organizing a series of family-oriented summer events. An annual Fourth of July celebration, complete with fireworks, made its debut in 1977. So did the Summer Solstice Arts Festival, a mix of art and music that became the model for Convergence a decade later.

Subsequent directors expanded the agency's agenda.

Marianne Cocchini, director from 1979 to 1984, exported the OCA's arts programming to other parts of the Providence parks system. She also reached out to different parts of the community, notably by launching the city's first Latin-American music festival.

"That was a big step," says Rizzo, who served as Cocchini's second in command. "In effect, we were doing multicultural stuff long before multiculturalism was hot."

Cocchini was followed by Marilyn Patric Epstein, who focused on programming for younger audiences. (Epstein, by the way, now works for the mother of all public parks: New York's Central Park.)

Rizzo took over in 1987, the same year the OCA decided to launch its most ambitious project to date: Convergence.

"The idea was simple," Rizzo says. "Rather than bringing people to the art like they do at a museum, Convergence was based on the notion of bringing art directly to the people. If they didn't like it, fine. If they did like it, great. Either way, they had an experience that they couldn't get anywhere else."

Year of the statues

In 1996, Convergence itself expanded. In response to that year's International Sculpture Center conference in Providence, the OCA decided to move about a dozen large-scale sculptures into downtown.

Suddenly, art and life were sharing the same sidewalks and streetcorners.

"I remember that first year Convergence came downtown," says Coogan. "All of a sudden there were pieces of contemporary sculpture everywhere. And they weren't barricaded in a gallery or museum. They were out on the street where everybody could see them."

During the sculpture conference, the cultural affairs office also funded an unusual pyrotechnical display by Providence artist Barnaby Evans.

The idea of lighting bonfires along the Providence River had first surfaced in 1994, when Evans lit a small flotilla of braziers as part of the city's First Night celebration. But the 1996 version, known as Second Fire, marked the real debut of what has since become the most popular piece of public art in Rhode Island history: WaterFire.

"The first time we did it, we weren't sure whether people were coming for the fires or for First Night," says Evans, who now oversees his own WaterFire empire. "The version we did for the sculpture conference showed us that people would come even if the fires were the only attraction."

Since then, Convergence has continued to grow.

In 1997, the festival added a film series, now known as the Convergence Film/Video/Animation Festival. It also expanded geographically, when the Town of Westerly decided to hold a Convergence-style sculpture exhibit in Wilcox Park.

Last year, Providence, Pawtucket, Newport and Tiverton all sponsored Convergence-related activities.

This year, the Convergence 2001 International Art Festival will take place Sept. 7-23. Among the highlights are a week-long film festival (Sept. 14-20) a two-day street painting festival featuring 200 artists (Sept. 14-16) and an "art car" parade (Sept. 8).

In addition, the festival will feature its usual array of outdoor sculptures, some of which have already started rolling in.

Looking ahead, Rizzo says he'd like to see Convergence become one of the premier arts events in the country.

"Initially, the focus was Roger Williams Park. Then we moved into downtown. Now we're trying to increase the overall quality of the art, which in turn will allow us to grow Convergence into a truly national event. After that, who knows?"

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MULTICULTURAL FESTIVALS such as this Indo-Chinese celebration at the Temple to Music in 1981 made art, music and live performances available to all.

PARKS DEPARTMENT ARCHIVES

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CONVERGENCE mixes art into city life. In 1998, Peter Stempel's Russian Houses built perspective.

BOB RIZZO PHOTO

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AT THE WATERFRONT FESTIVAL at Waterplace Park in 1997, a metropolitan jewel was emerging.

KAREN BERNARD PHOTO

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CHILDREN PLAY in Alvin Shear's Cat's Cradle in Roger Williams Park, part of the 1995 Convergence.

PARKS DEPARTMENT ARCHIVES

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CULTURAL CURIOSITY brings people together at the Waterfront Festival at India Point Park in 1998.

BOB RIZZO PHOTO

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