

Rodney Vaccaro
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I am not an expert in arts funding. I am not a great or famous artist of any kind. I'm just a working Joe. A guy who has made a very modest living in the arts over my 58 years. I don't live in Michigan any more. I do, occasionally return to direct for a community theatre in Grand Rapids. But I am hardly the person I would select to speak before a group, such as yours...a group I regard as heroes.

Certainly, anyone involved in the arts in America at this point in time would be regarded...kindly... as almost Quixotically heroic, perhaps misguidedly romantic, certainly blindly optimistic. I would qualify to be among you in that respect. I am an almost totally blind optimist. So much so, that when I lived in Michigan I drove a convertible. That's optimism.

There is however, a reason why I am, I think, particularly qualified to speak before this group, and that is that I am almost completely a product of your efforts. Despite the fact that I work in Hollywood and have been trained in major markets and traveled the world, I consider myself entirely a Michigan artist. Whatever talent I have was formed in the schools and theatres and concert halls and museums and rehearsal rooms throughout this great state, through programs and experiences, many of which were funded with monies raised, if not by you, then by your predecessors. I worked the majority of my life here in Michigan, in the arts, for organizations that mostly relied on your efforts to exist, and I took the gifts I was given here into the world. In that respect, I am here to say, from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

I come here at a time of critical distress for the arts, a time where the very existence of art in America is threatened by our current dire economic climate. I am sure I don't need to elaborate, especially not to this group. I wish I had the wisdom to give you solutions. I don't. I can only remind you of how important your work is, and beg you not to stop.

I am sure that all of you are familiar with the current mindset of our society, a society that believes that in an economic crisis, the last place we should be spending money is on something as frivolous and unnecessary as the arts. This idea is now passed off as common sense, as if it were the most natural idea in the world, and yet, the idea of the arts as an unimportant element of our daily life is an idea unique to just the last few decades, decades that have paralleled our decline as a great society. The fact is, that even a cursory examination of history shows that art has traveled hand in hand with technology, politics, industry, religion and science throughout human history.

I firmly believe that we find ourselves in this mess precisely because of this short-sighted, small-minded way of thinking and the only hope we have to save our society, the America we love, is by changing that misguided idea and understanding that embracing art is not a drain on our resources but the only hope we have to renewing them. This is the task you have been given, no less.

If fine art was not meant to be an intrinsic element of human existence and development, then how is it possible that it has been an essential part of who we are since we crawled out of ponds? If it were not important, how is it possible that cave drawings exist? Think of how remarkable that was...in a time when simple human existence required an enormous expenditure of time and energy, a human being, would be compelled to pick up a piece of coal and record an event outside of himself...outside of what was seemingly necessary for survival. And yet today, being an artist means that, on a regular basis, you have to endure people telling you that your entire life's work is a frill. I doubt very much that any lawyer, or doctor, or bricklayer ever had anyone describe their work as unnecessary, and yet, before there were lawyers or doctors or bricklayers or popes or kings or captains of industry, there were artists. As a society, we have lost our understanding of the value of the arts. This is a condition unique in human history and I firmly believe it is for this very reason that we find ourselves in the terrible situation we are now.

It was not always so.

One of the most fortunate parts of this fortunate life I was blessed with was the time in which I was born. As a baby boomer, I came of age in the 60s, which was just a tremendously exciting time to grow up

I think, what we call the 60s today was really just a period of about six years...from 1968 to about 1974...and those were my most formative years.

I had two older brothers, my brother Peter who was a theatre major and my brother Fil who was an art major, both at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids. Now, you have to understand that I grew up in a Sicilian family and in our family dinner was sacred. Sacred. We all sat down at 5:30 and it was not unusual for us to stay at the table until 10 or 11 at night. My parents were extremely generous people and we were encouraged to bring people home...friends, acquaintances, strangers we might have only known for a few hours...it didn't matter...you know, they say, if you marry an Italian, you're an Italian. In my family, if you sat next to an Italian on the bus, you're an Italian. My poor mother never knew how many she was cooking for. It was always at least eight, and most nights it would be between 12 and 20.

My brothers were always bringing home their college friends...starving artists filled our table every night, long hair, unshaven, paint spattered, smoking, drinking wine, shoveling in my mother's pasta and arguing, in loud voices...Descartes, Sartre, Tennessee Williams, Puccini, Pollack, Rothko, Warhol, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Eisenstein, Bunuel, Fellini, Bergman, Hesse, Tom Wolf, Ginsberg, Ken Kesey...these are the voices I heard growing up.

Remembering back now, the thing that most people get wrong about the 60s is a misunderstanding of how well rounded we were. It wasn't just the Beatles and the Stones...yes, they were there...but there was also Rogers and Hammerstein, Andy Williams, Barbara Streisand and Bernstein. There was Vonnegut and the Marx Brothers and Kurt Weill and Tiny Tim, Judy Garland, Jacques Brel, Carol Channing and Lenny Bruce. It was a circus.

It was also not just about youth. Yes, we were driving it, but the voices we were listening to...Kesey and Vonnegut and Salinger and Learhy...these guys were my Dad's age.

But this was not a revolution. It was not an especially unique time for the arts. It just seems so because of the dark age that followed. We were an extension of the artistic lineage of American culture.

Almost all of the founding fathers were multi-lingual, well-read, lucid and literary writers. Many were also painters and poets and fine musicians. There was not an old west town that didn't boast a Shakespearian theatre. The Astor Place riot in 1849, a riot involving 20,000 lower, working class New Yorkers which left 25 dead and 120 wounded, and was significant as the first time the National Guard had to be called out was a riot between groups essentially divided by an argument over the difference between the American interpretation of Shakespeare and the traditional British interpretation.

I remember when I saw the movie Pollack and they had that section where Life Magazine came out and did an article on him. I was so struck by that. That was 1949...now, the thing to keep in mind is that Life was a populist magazine...it was the People of its time. And their article on Pollack wasn't a cynical piece about, ..."who is this man getting paid to throw paint on canvas?" ...or a tell-all about his affairs and his drinking...it was a serious article about a serious artist. It was an answer to a society that knew something important was going on and wanted to understand.

It was all so alive...America in the 60s...then, we were alive. We led the world in innovation and ethics. Education, literature, painting, music, architecture, design, a search for justice, a respect for truth. We barely resembled the country we have become.

My generation was probably the most privileged generation that ever lived. We were born into a time where the world had been secured and there was affluence. But we were also a generation born to search.

Our fathers had just fought a war and I believe we were an entire generation raised by people with undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder. My single strongest memory of my father is of him sitting staring at the television. I have come to believe that, in those times, he was not consumed with the problems of the Cartwright family. He was trying to make sense of the life

he'd lived...a life that began in poverty, was tempered in death and horror and then bought off with two cars and a washing machine.

I believe the social unrest we experienced in the 60s was not fueled by sex, drugs and rock and roll or the Vietnam War or civil rights. Those were symptoms. The cause was the sense of dissatisfaction we absorbed from the generation before us; a generation that had seen the worst humanity could offer and now wondered, where was the best?

And where did we look to find those answers? To find the answers to those questions, questions we couldn't even put into words, questions passed down from silent fathers? We looked where the generations before us looked. We turned to songs and novels, movies, poems and plays and painting and sculpture.

The artists of that time not only expanded the boundaries of their art, they were rewarded for it. A large number of artists made a good living working as artists. The marketplace recognized that art had value and innovative, exploratory art had even more value. Everywhere you went, there were people singing on street corners, dancing in parks, and writing in cafes. Theatres and art galleries and museums and small town symphonies sprang up as common and beautiful as flowers, and all of it was funded by a government that recognized the need for funding with organizations like the newly formed National Endowment for the Arts, and taking the lead from our government, corporations and private individuals embraced arts funding, encouraging in every way new and innovative and yes, uncensored public art.

And that investment paid off in expanded ideas throughout the society, not just in the arts themselves, but also in science and technology, industry and engineering, world peace and social justice. Expanded ideas and an expanded, affluent society with a thirst for social justice and progress.

There is a common misconception that artists are dreamers that live ahead of their time. This isn't true. Generally, great artists are people who live exactly within their time. They are not dreamers. I don't think of myself as a dreamer. I am a realist. I believe, as an artist, my job is to

illuminate the glory of the human spirit and that spirit is not a dream, that spirit is not an ideal...it is a living reality that all of us experience every single day of our lives.

I see it now...here...in each and every one of you. You who have dedicated your lives to beauty, to truth, to intellect...not to profit centers...not to comfort...but to a belief that there is something higher in us, something better and to the belief that on faith and on faith alone, you can provide a reflection of that dream. You are soldiers, engaged in a battle between hope and cynicism, fighting for the very essence of our civilization.

And what a battle you have ahead of you. Artists will always be here. They cannot be stopped. But where will our audience come from? I was a product of the public educational system we once had...a public educational system that was once the envy of the world. A public educational system that was considered important enough to be generously supported by our government and not left up to the crumbs that dribble from a public lottery, a lottery that I like to refer to as a dreaming tax on the poor.

I said I couldn't offer solutions, but I do have one. I have a solution to solve every problem we currently face in America. Let Congress pass a law that says that nobody in this country...From Bill Gates to Ozzie Osborn...from Warren Buffet to Mel Gibson to President Obama, God Bless Him...nobody can earn more than the lowest paid teacher in the lowest funded school district. Pass that law and watch how fast things change.

More and more we lose proper arts educations in the schools. Again, in a time of economic hardship, smaller, short-term thinking minds consider the Arts a frill...simply time and money taken away from serious study. In the history of education, when was there ever another time where the arts were not considered a serious study? How preposterous is that idea to any educated mind. Well, I also have a solution to Arts funding in the schools, and it's this: Cut everything else.

If you want to learn English, math, languages, history and physics...study music. Drama teaches you English, history, speech, geography, political science, sociology, psychology, philosophy, languages and physical education. Stagecraft teaches higher math, geometry, calculus, physics,

architecture and biology. Painting and sculpture teach anatomy, biology, geometry and chemistry, if you throw in art history, you will also get world history and comparative religions. In terms of phys ed, for stamina, agility and strength there isn't an NFL or an NBA player in America who wouldn't have the shit kicked out of them by any 16-year-old ballerina.

I am being completely serious. If you are truly interested in teaching children and making them into fully rounded, curious, innovative minds that will go on to lead happy productive lives then, rather than filling their heads with a meaningless succession of math formulas and chemistry tables, teach them the Bach B minor Mass, which is, in itself a huge mathematical equation that will not only give them the who, what and where of the world but also the why and along the way, maybe, just maybe give them a glimpse of the face of God.

If there is hope at all for America, and by extension, the world and our species, I truly believe it lies in returning the arts to its rightful place in our society, and if that is going to happen, we cannot look for it to take place in centers like New York, or Chicago or Los Angeles. It must happen here and it must happen now. And by here, I mean here...in Michigan.

The Broadway Theatre in New York is nowhere near what it once was when there was an intelligent, theatre going audience. Today, the vast majority of the audience in New York is a tourist audience paying in excess of hundreds of dollars for a ticket. In the current climate, I doubt that playwrights like Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neil would have ever stood a chance at a career.

The Broadway stages have abandoned, for the most part, original work in favor of revival after revival that have built in, safe audiences, and long established stage actors who have given their lives to perfecting the communion between live action, spoken word and the masses are being stepped over for television stars who can mug for two hundred bucks a seat.

In city after city, orchestras are failing while consumer based, manufactured, one tune wonders dominate the minds of our children and the front pages of what used to be our newspapers' arts sections. Meaningless, audience contemptuous excuses for music and musical performance. As

Joni Mitchell said, when asked about the current state of music, "The muse is gone and all that's left is the ick."

In my own industry, the film business, the studios have passed down dictums that they are not even interested in hearing ideas for dramas or in anything for that matter that is not a pre-marketed tent pole feature, such as Iron Man or Spiderman, or a teen based, toilet comedy like The Hangover or soul robbing garbage like the Saw series. In this world, the world we live in, not only Fellini and Trufaut and Kurosawa would be denied a mainstream voice, but even Coppola and Scorsese.

On TV, in shows like American Idol and Dancing With The Stars, dance and music have been reduced to competitive events, robbing both mediums of their most essential truth...that the purpose of art is to eliminate winners and losers and to celebrate and explore the magnificent gray area we all live in day to day and make all of us winners.

On a personal side note...I just want to say how unbelievably base I especially find a show like American Idol. As a stage director, I have sat behind that table more times than I can even count, and I have seen the pure, raw courage it takes for a performer to get up and sing in front of strangers. It is an act of unbelievable heroism and to publicly humiliate these people for daring to dream is an act that deserves the contempt of any civilized society.

As a society, we have turned the business of art over to these purely commercial enterprises. The problem with this is, art entrusted to consumer driven enterprises will not develop to enlighten and inspire creative thought but purely to encourage consumption. This is why, we now, as a nation, make almost nothing. We have become a nation of consumers instead of creators. I find it fascinating that the period in which this shift took place, is book ended by two inventions...on one end, the personal computer, invented, arguably by Apple purely for the purpose of creation...and on the other end, the iPad, also invented by Apple, but a tool exclusively for consumption.

But these are societal problems, right? Problems that affect the whole country. The whole world. Aren't they better solved in the major centers?

You know what I used to hate? When I was working here in Michigan as a stage director...I used to hate it when people would bring in directors from major cities and they would talk them up, and I would ask, "Are they any good?" And to this, I would get the answer, "Well...he's FROM New York." See, I had lived in New York...on 46th street, between 10th and 11th, and I knew, the guy who stood on my street corner every day holding the John 3:16 sign while wearing a football helmet and panty hose was also FROM New York.

I'll tell you something about Hollywood and the film industry. If you're in a meeting with five people, three of them are going to be from Michigan. It's just a fact. You get used to asking, where are you from. In the beginning, it used to make me really proud, now, it makes me sad. I am not seeing the great creative artists that Michigan produced, but the great minds Michigan lost because we could not provide a climate where they could stay.

I remember, when I decided to leave Grand Rapids and move to Hollywood...I remember telling this woman I knew at a cocktail party that I was going and she said to me..."So, you're selling out." Well, I was really offended by this. This woman's husband had made a great deal of money at real estate...I am sure, when he decided to become a real estate agent, nobody ever accused him of selling out just because he wanted to provide for his family. Nobody says that to doctors or business leaders. Just to artists who only want to work and provide for their families.

Sometimes, I think we should just let it all die. Just stop producing art for a while and see where the society goes. Just shut down all museums, all symphonies, all theatres. Gone. But that would never happen. Artists would never let it happen. It would be impossible. This is our strength. It is the strength that makes us great and the hill we die on. We are passionate about what we do. We are driven to do what we do. Beyond what is practical. Beyond what is reasonable. We must do it.

I was a community theatre brat. I still am. I still come back to direct community theater and people often ask me why. The reason is, because, as you may have guessed, my personal currency, that which feeds me is passion. I live on it. I could not exist without it. And in terms of

passion, community theatre folk have a corner on the market. You will never meet so many who give so much for so little.

I was directing a show once, and in the cast was a man who had gotten into some minor trouble with the law. He was sentenced to community service, and he asked the court appointed officer if community theatre counted as community service, now this was before Charlie Sheen. Once again, Michigan leads the world. Well, this enlightened individual, God bless them, said, yes, as long as he had someone who could supervise his hours, they would consider community theatre community service. And so, they asked me to supervise his sentence and I said yes. So, the court officer called me and asked a number of questions and one of them was, "Approximately, how many hours would a community theatre actor put into a single show?" Well, I had never really thought about this, and so I picked up a pencil and I quickly began figuring, the number of hours for rehearsal, and then performance, additional hours for dance rehearsals music rehearsals and fittings. I decided not to count the number of hours spent learning lines at home, private voice lessons and dance class...and so, I came up with a figure and gave it to the court officer. The number of hours this man would spend on a single show, for free. The court officer paused a moment, and then he said, "You know...he didn't murder anyone."

This is why the artist will never die. The artist needs to speak. But if the artist cannot be heard, those who cannot hear him will die. They will die creatively and they will die spiritually. They will die with the bitter taste of cynicism in their mouths. This why you must carry on in your great work. Despite what small minds might think, you are not providing for the elite few who speak, but for the millions who need to listen.

You know, I remember once, my daughter Olivia came home from school, and I asked her what she had done that day...she was in first grade...maybe younger. She told me, her teacher read them the tale of the ant and the grasshopper. And then she told it to me. There was this industrious ant and this lazy grasshopper and the ant labored all day in the fields and stored up grain for the winter, and all the grasshopper did was sit in the sun and sing songs, and then, winter came and the snow and the grasshopper knocked at the ant's door and asked for some food and the ant said, "When I was laboring in the fields, all you did was sit in the sun and sing

songs. Why should I share with you?" And the ant wouldn't share his food and he slammed the door and the grasshopper froze to death.

Well, okay...being a grasshopper, I felt the need to tell her "The Ant and The Grasshopper...The REAL Story" ...Once upon a time. There was this ant and this grasshopper and the ant labored all day in the fields and stored up grain for the winter, and while the ant worked the grasshopper sat by the field and sang songs. And even though the ant enjoyed the songs and they made him feel good about himself and his place in the world, he never gave the grasshopper a single crumb for singing them. And then, winter came and the snow and the grasshopper knocked at the ant's door and asked for some food and the ant said, "When I was laboring in the fields, all you did was sit in the sun and sing songs. Why should I share with you?" And the ant wouldn't share his food and he slammed the door and the grasshopper froze to death. But the story goes on...

The next spring, the ant again went out to work in the fields. But there was no grasshopper to sing for him. In time, the ant began to miss the grasshopper and his songs. He tried to remember the songs but he found he couldn't. Then, he began to lose the sense of beauty and worth he once felt in his work. Without the grasshopper's songs, he began to think of himself only as an ant. He had no joy. No sense of his own life. Without the grasshopper's songs, it became harder and harder for the ant to get out of bed in the morning. When winter came, the ant found that he had produced way too little grain for the harsh winter. He and his family soon ran out of food. Without the grasshopper's songs, he couldn't make sense of his suffering. He found no joy in his existence.

Now, because I was talking to a six year old, I left off the part about the ant axe murdering his whole family and hanging himself in the barn, but you get the idea.

Industry may provide jobs, wages, put a roof over our heads and food on the table. Science may provide advancements that make us live longer healthier lives. Government provides structure and safety.

You provide the sense of passion that gives all of this meaning.

Passion. This is what we bring to our communities as artists...in whatever discipline. This is what you enable. This is what you make. Passion. And passion has value. Passion is necessary. Passion is not a frill.

If the arts are going to be saved...it is not going to happen in New York or Los Angeles or even Chicago or Boston or Washington DC...the arts will be saved in Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo and Lansing and Saginaw and Paw Paw and Lowell and Farmington and Ypsilanti and Bay City. The future of art is here...and it is not here after the recession is over or when times get better...it is here now! Right now!

Creative thought, the inspiration for creative thought, self reflection, intelligence and a belief in the glorious nature of humanity is not a frill during a time of hardship it is a road out of hardship and if this time we live in, this terrible dark time is going to give way to enlightenment, it will not happen in the board rooms of banks or in the chambers of Congress but in the museums and theatres and recital halls.

We are, indeed, in crisis. But it is not a crisis of the economy, or of world peace or of greed or the environment. Those are symptoms of a crisis of the soul, our communal soul, and it can only be resolved through redemption of the soul. Art can do that. You, as artists, can do that.

I say you because you are artists in the purest form. You will, for the most part, receive no applause. The sculptures and paintings and theatre pieces and symphonies that you make possible will not bare your names. Your efforts ensure the very history of our time will be carved in stone. And like those who built the great cathedrals of Europe, only the stones themselves will remember your names. But like those cathedrals, your work will stand and remind future generations, not only who we were, but also why we were. The work you do is not a frill. It is an essential component of what made us great and what will make us great again. I beg you...do not lose hope. I beg you...continue. Thank you.

Rodney Vaccaro

Raised in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Emmy award winning Screenwriter/Producer Rodney Vaccaro has worked extensively as a Screenwriter, Actor, Playwright and Stage Director throughout the United States, France and Monaco. He holds degrees from Grand Rapids Junior College and Western Michigan University, was trained in the Actors Studio and the Chekhov Studio in New York and worked in the south of France under the tutelage of Michael Stewart and Francine Pascal.

In Michigan, Mr. Vaccaro worked as an actor at The New Vic Theatre in Kalamazoo. He was also associate director at Grand Rapids Civic Theatre and a founding member of Actors' Theatre of Grand Rapids. Mr. Vaccaro has been a stage director for Grand Rapids Civic Theatre, Actors' Theatre of Grand Rapids and The Saginaw Symphony Opera as well as numerous other theatres in and around Michigan.

Vaccaro has written six plays, winning numerous awards including the Louisville New Plays Festival and The Regional Midwestern New Plays Festival. He has also published three novels. As a screenwriter, Mr. Vaccaro has worked for virtually every studio in Hollywood. His produced screenplays include HBO's Night Of The Running Man, Warner Brothers' Three To Tango, MGM's Caught In The Act, TNT's The Engagement Ring, CBS's Snow Wonder and Showtime's Run the Wild Fields, nominated for Emmy's in three categories. Vaccaro currently lives in Los Angeles.