



BEYOND BOWLING

The presenting industry values the arts,
but does your neighborhood police officer,
reservist and neurosurgeon value the arts, too?

BY JOHN MOORE

Asking an artist the value of art is like asking a surgeon the value of a scalpel, the politician the value of a vote or a marathoner the value of oxygen.

“Stories are like oxygen, said Amichai Lau-Lavie, founder of a New York Jewish ritual theater company cleverly called Storahtelling. “You can’t see it, but you’d die without it.”

But what about everyone else? It’s as plain as ongoing efforts to cut funding everywhere from schools to the NEA that the arts are not part of all Americans’ daily intake of O2.

Not everyone is like Charles Limb, an ear surgeon, associate professor of otolaryngology at Johns Hopkins Hospital -- and self-professed music junkie. Limb is part the emerging scientific field that studies

how music can be used for everything from speeding recovery from strokes to improving treatment for hearing loss.

“It is almost sad that this question even has to be asked, honestly,” said Limb, the rare human bird who has managed to incorporate his personal passion for the arts into his groundbreaking professional work as a neuroscientist. “The obvious value of the arts far exceeds anybody’s ability to articulate it.”

But for every Charles Limb there is a John Kline, the Minnesota congressman who is leading the effort to eliminate 43 federal school programs, including Arts in Education, in the name of “setting new priorities in education funding.” So clearly there are educated and powerful people in America who do not ascribe the same value to arts that artists do. Safe to say

you won't find Kline spending much time ruminating on, say, existential quandaries put on stage at the nearby Guthrie Theatre.

"I definitely know people who have no time for the arts, or they have always thought of the arts as elective, or a luxury," Limb said. "I have often wondered how they can live the way they do. I always presume they have other things that fill the emotional or cognitive space that the arts fill for me. I hope they do, anyway."

But Limb is proof that the arts aren't just for artists anymore.

It's as clear as the weekly Nielsen TV ratings that more Americans live on the periphery of the classic arts than immerse themselves in them. Fact: The Broadway darling "The Book of Mormon," which no one would accuse of being the highest of art forms, would have to sell out for 1,200 weeks to be seen by as many people who took in "The Hangover Part II" over Memorial Day weekend alone. And yet the arts do play a surprisingly meaningful role in the lives of Americans you wouldn't primarily identify as artists. And what they get from them is as varied as the people themselves.

People like Colorado police officer Pat Heffner, a self-identified Christian conservative who struggles with the idea of public funding for the arts. But as a human being in a tough line of work, she's drawn to the solace, restorative power – and essential escape – that the arts afford her.

"We are called in when people are at their worst. And over time, that can create an entire profession full of cynical and bitter people," Heffner said. "But the symphony gives me peace and soothes my soul. The talent I see from ballet dancers performing leaps and spins amazes me. And I only wish I had the soothing voice of an actor singing in a musical. So while I am not a huge fan of subsidizing the arts, I do see the value in it, as long as the art is tasteful, and is not intended to offend any particular group."

While the arts and organized religion are often at odds, they were for centuries intertwined. Just as

the arts and spirituality have always been intertwined within Matt Miller, pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Sioux City, Iowa.

"From a religious perspective, and for many cultures, the arts have always been a key conduit to express our experience of the divine," said Miller. "That is because, at their best, both theology and the arts engage what is integral to being made in the image and likeness of God – our imagination."

"Of course, one of the mistakes people of faith often make is thinking that subject matter is what determines the value of art. Art well-made and shared with others ultimately glorifies God, who has placed such an amazing gift in the world."

Army Sergeant:

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And the arts bring everyday value to everyone from soldiers to strippers. Kaylee Martin, a Denver erotic dancer, says the arts are relevant to dancers because most are artistic and free-minded.

"Many dancers I've known pursue art outside of work within the club," Martin said. Many design clothes, sing opera, record hip-hop and are involved in their own music producing. I grew up dancing, playing music and performing in theater. I think it is important for a dancer to be artistic on some level before becoming an erotic entertainer. Art opens the mind, and to be able to sell feminine eroticism in a rigid society, an open mind is definitely an asset.

"Essentially, being an erotic entertainer is an art form of its own, because it requires integrating several

forms of art into a delicious fusion, resulting in its own craft.”

Army Sergeant Eric Woolcott was assigned for four years at Fort Drum, a military reservation in Jefferson County, N.Y. He says being unable to attend live rock music concerts by bands like his favorite, The Smiths, was one of the hardest parts of his enlistment. “I was 90 miles from anywhere that would play anything that was worth listening to,” he said.

“The military isn’t a place that much fosters an appreciation for the arts beyond bowling,” he added with a laugh. “It’s a mixed bag of misfits, so you weren’t likely to see an Andy Warhol poster on the barracks wall.”

But living in that climate for four years did nothing to quell the value of the arts within Woolcott, who now describes himself as a voracious attendee of museums and concerts of all kinds.

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That, to Limb, is most responsible for the divide in America between those who value arts in their everyday lives, and those who simply don’t. Teach a child to love the arts, and you foster an adult who might use the arts to change the world.

Limb, for example, recently had jazz musicians and rappers undergo MRI exams to study how the brain works during musical improvisation. In other words, Limb maps the creative juices in the brain. Who, but an artist himself, would think to do so?

“Even within medicine, I could have picked a lot of other fields, and they would have been interesting, perhaps even important, or useful to society” he said. “But they wouldn’t have meshed as well for me personally with what I love.”

Lau-Lavie, an Israeli-born teacher of Judaic Literature, founded StorahTelling as a way to integrate his two passions – theater and education. StorahTelling

uses innovative theater techniques to make ancient stories and traditions accessible for new generations, thus advancing Judaic literacy and raising social consciousness.

“I am a storyteller,” Lau-Lavie said. “For me, stories shape reality and determine our identity – Why we are, who we love, what matters. All good art is made of great stories that sustain our soul. What would our lives look like without it?”

Jeremy Nowak is different kind of unlikely arts avenger who found a way to bridge his two loves – and lives. He is a community development guru who built a Philadelphia grassroots reinvestment fund into a billion-dollar, multi-state community investment group. He was just named president of the William Penn Foundation, a \$2 billion philanthropy dedicated to fostering rich cultural expression and building community.

“Artist work and performance spaces become centers of community where a cross-section of Americans socialize, recreate, learn and produce,” Nowak said. “The social network value of these spaces is critical to urban change and development. They create what economists refer to as positive externalities; value that cannot be captured through an immediate price but have benefits that accrue to the community and public at large.”

As an educator, college president and research psychologist, Dr. Pamela Trotman Reid has surprisingly much in common with that Colorado cop. She’s among the cross-section of Americans whose find essential solace in simply availing themselves of everything from Mo-town to Mo-zart.

“Throughout my life, I have found the arts to be a source of inspiration and relaxation,” said Reid, head of Saint Joseph College in West Hartford, Conn. “Whether it is music, great drama or comedies, or simply a few moments to reflect on a beautiful painting, I almost always find some respite from the daily grind and a source of new energy.”

Limb, more than most, is living his love for the arts in a field we would otherwise think of as far removed

from them. He is a jazz addict and plays several instruments, but he never had a sense that he was going to be a professional musician.

“For me, it was always music first,” he said. “Always. I felt like the music taught me more about myself and more about the world than anything else I had ever experienced. I just didn’t feel that was where I would make my greatest impact in the world.”

He found his home in a field that seeks to understand, study and improve the way we hear. And he found it to be a world surprisingly aligned with that of the artist.

“In the medical and scientific profession, there is a pretty clear sense that the reason people do what they do is all about understanding the human experience,” he said. “It seems pretty clear to me that a lot of people become surgeons and doctors because they want to engage in the stuff of life. And really, being an artist is the same thing. To me, the mindset of playing a musical instrument is really very similar to the mindset of being a surgeon. You are trying to do something to better the human condition.

“And that, to me, is the arts in a nutshell.”

Limb’s field, called the auditory neuro-sciences, is what discovered that people who have had a stroke can re-learn how to sing before they can re-learn how to speak. Now a large body of neurologists are looking into music as a form of therapy for many other diseases.

“Music taps into certain brain circuitry that normal life just doesn’t,” Limb said. “You can even see it in pathologic states, like a stutterer who stops stuttering when he starts singing. Music just engages the brain on every level. And when you look at the neural demands of playing an instrument, it really is so complicated. And that’s what makes music such a valuable tool. We can understand so much about how the brain works through music.”

But would we ever understand if the questions weren’t being asked by an artist?