

# The Play's The Thing

by Rocco Landesman

Art is necessary because it is unnecessary. I will elaborate in a minute.

I have not been invited to give the Blashfield Address because I have made significant contributions to scholarship or have created remarkable works of art. To paraphrase Max Bialystock: I couldn't—I was a Broadway producer.

Instead, I am here today because of my current position as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. So I will begin by stepping happily into my assigned role, which is to make the case that the arts—most especially the theatrical arts, of course—are vital, important, and in a word, necessary. On the trading floor, this is called “talking your book,” and it's what I do almost every day. We have a motto at the NEA, which is a two-word sentence with three meanings (and I think this audience might appreciate a triple entendre): “Art works.”

The term refers first to the works of art themselves—what we fund at the NEA. Secondly, to the way in which art works on people. That is, the experience of art. And finally it refers to art as work, an important part of our economy and communities.

I have especially emphasized this last part, and have been traveling the country to show how a cultural presence in a neighborhood impacts civic engagement, child welfare, and economic growth. Those are especially useful talking points with Congress during the budget process.

But I would conjecture that not one of us in this room has embarked on a career in the arts (or letters) because of data that shows that art in schools reduces truancy by 35 percent, or that art in a city jumpstarts economic development. Most of us who have made a career in the arts did so because at one point in our lives we had an experience with a work of art that was indelible. The career chose us. This was something we had to do.

But why? What is it about this activity that is so compelling? What makes it so irresistible? This is a question for anthropologists, and they're not exactly sure.

Darwin was perhaps the first to notice that art is a universal in every human society. There is not a place on earth, now or at any time in human history, without art. Every society has music, and everywhere there is music it is especially embraced by the young, suggesting it plays a role in sexual selection. Anthropologists believe that music preceded language itself, and that mothers sang to their babies before speech became a separate and distinct activity.

Aborigines in Australia have been making paintings on rocks for 50,000 years. Red ocher was being used for body ornamentation 100,000 years ago in Africa. Fashion is the oldest art, and I always love to point out that the first word in artifice is, indeed, “art.” Dance, storytelling, drama, painting, and poetry date from the earliest records of our history. The Paleolithic hand axe was as much an aesthetic as a utilitarian object.

The assumption, of course, is that if something is a universal, it is an imperative. Well, not necessarily. And herein lies the conundrum: we can survive perfectly well as a species without art. It does not make us run faster or hunt smarter. It does not make us braver. It doesn't organize work. It doesn't promote family stability or monogamy, as Picasso and one or two others have demonstrated. So we have to ask: is art to human development what the appendix is to anatomy? Everyone has it, but for what purpose it is hard to say.

The impulse to sing and dance and draw and tell stories must be hardwired into us, part of our essential humanity, or we would find human societies that don't do those things. Or we would find animals that do. Not only do other animals not engage in sexual foreplay, they also don't do comedy and tragedy. But the question remains: can art be the most quintessentially human of activities and an evolutionary dead letter?

First, the quintessentially human part. As the Chairman of the NEA, I naturally argue that the arts are fundamental. If the president of the American Association of Plumbing Contractors were standing before you, he would explain why sanitation and waste removal are how we differentiate ourselves from the apes.

But I'm also a theater guy, so I will go further—back to “talking my book.” Of all the arts, theater is the most essentially and elementally human.

The reason is obvious, is it not? What is the most common and universal human activity besides sex? It is gossip. Theater is nothing more or less than the conduct and codification of gossip. We talk among ourselves about other people. We try to know their secrets, and we gauge their honesty and virtue and reliability or lack thereof. Machiavelli, the first cultural anthropologist, told his prince to watch his back because a very special and, yes, unique element of human behavior is deception. Humans know how to deceive and therefore have to know how to detect deceit in order to survive.

Hamlet did not know whether Claudius was telling him the truth, so he staged a play—“The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king”—and set out to observe Claudius's reaction to the play. But it is in fact Shakespeare's play, the whole of *Hamlet*, that shows the ritualization of gossip that is drama. Plays are literally overheard conversations, enacted for a purpose.

When we enter a theater, it is expressly to listen to other people talking among themselves so that we may make certain observations and draw certain conclusions. Those conclusions may be guided by the playwright, but there is no doubt that what we are doing is observing the behavior of others, talking about it among ourselves afterwards, making inferences, and taking lessons from what we have seen.

As we do when we gossip. So and so is a liar, so and so is potentially violent, she professes love for one but has designs on another, he has concealed his ambition to be king. We love to observe people in their infinite variety and we like to talk about them among ourselves, comparing notes about our observations. Such is gossip. Such is the theater.

But is this most human of activities—be it theater or any of the arts—necessary? The psychologist Geoffrey Miller, in his persuasive book, *The Mating Mind*, writes that, “The evolution of art is hard to explain through survival selection, but is a pretty easy target for sexual selection.”

The thesis is simple enough. Art is interesting and entertaining; artists are admirable and seductive. As a natural result, we are attracted to artists. Miller cites the Scheherazade effect, named for the Arabian storyteller who told the sultan 1,001 tales to hold his interest so he did not abandon her for another courtesan.

Or for the men, the Dionysus effect, where it is no accident that the god of dance and music is also the god of seduction. The anthropologist Don Symons has observed that tribal chiefs are both inspiring orators and highly polygamous men, a tradition that continues to the present day.

Until the revolution that was mechanical reproduction, the most valued art was always that which was perceived to involve the most time, skill, cost, and difficulty of creation. For instance, the paintings in the Sistine Chapel or the great, architecturally elaborate cathedrals.

In evolutionary terms, art is a “fitness” indicator. Take, for example, the curious case of the bowerbirds. Talk about a degree of difficulty! The male golden bowerbird of northern Australia is nine inches long. To attract a female, he builds a nest of staggering inefficiency, not constructed to be compact, or secure, or protected from the elements, or in any other way utilitarian. It is in fact up to nine feet high, the equivalent of a human bedroom measuring 70 feet high and weighing several tons. It is garnished with the most brilliantly colored objects: orchids and berries and feathers arranged in clusters of uniform color. When the colors fade, the ornaments are quickly replaced.

Regent and satin bowerbirds go further, constructing avenue-shaped structures with enclosed walkways and long inner walls actually painted with fruit residues. The art of the bowerbird, as Miller notes, “serves no survival or parental function outside courtship.”

But as with cathedrals, the more elaborate the better, and the more honored (in terms of mating privilege) the builder. The lesson, according to Miller and prominent anthropologists of art like Ellen Dissanayake, is that the greater the accomplishment, the greater the perceived skill, fitness, and desirability of the creator.

This anthropological argument is seductive, but it is not sufficient. Yes, the architect who designed Rockefeller Center and the artists that painted the murals in its lobby may embody the same principles of sexual selection that created the bowerbird. We share with animals some aesthetic elements like song and language, and as with the bowerbird, even rudimentary painting.

But I think we would all agree that artistry is an inefficient marker of a mate's ability to protect and extend the species. The owner of Rockefeller Center is a much better catch, from a security and resource standpoint, than its designer.

There is, alas, no evolutionary straight line to the complex and universal endeavor that we recognize as human art. Much more than biology is at play. If “fitness” in the reproductive sense were the main criterion for choosing a mate, the rich and powerful would be accorded the highest status in a society. And while they certainly get their share—and then some—we also venerate artists who exhibit no signs of reproductive advantage in the Darwinian sense. In fact, many artists are the opposite: unreliable both as providers and parents. They are often not powerful in any conventional sense.

I would argue that counter-intuitively, and even counter-logically, the value of art turns not on the notion that it is necessary but rather the opposite: we can live without it, but we don't want to.

Art is not so much the predication as the elaboration of our humanity. It is the unnecessary that gives life its flourish: the exuberance of an inspired jazz riff; the startling first encounter with pointillism; the moment at the height of a dancer's leap when time seems to stop; the Shakespearean soliloquy that takes your breath away; the surprise and satisfaction in a brilliant rhyme. None of these experiences—and let's be honest about this—has readily apparent survival value.

When we say something is artful, we mean that it is more than useful. It is something else, something more. The great theorems of mathematics are called beautiful. A baseball pitcher is

said to paint the corners of the plate like Picasso. Michael Jordan is described as a virtuoso. A surprising football play is said to be brilliantly choreographed.

We refer to the martial arts, the art of the deal, the art of cooking, and the art of sex. In each case we mean beyond the ordinary, beyond the merely practical: that there is an extra element that is ineffable and unknowable. There is a poetic dimension that lifts it a little bit off the ground.

When we say that politics, or teaching, or betting on racehorses, is more art than science, we mean that there is some magical aspect not quite accounted for in the exigent world as we know it. There is the potential for disequilibrium, for mystery—what John Keats called “negative capability.”

We know what intelligence is. We measure it on tests. Talent is much more elusive. There are laws in civil society and in physics. There are rules in games and in the classroom. In art, the rush comes when we overturn the laws and break the rules and create something new. Yet because it comes from a long and accretive tradition, we feel like we know it—like we have always known it. Surprise and recognition at once.

So thrilling. So important. And so unnecessary.