University of Houston
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Arts

40th Anniversary of a Royal Success

UH has been Presenting the Houston Shakespeare Festival to Appreciative Audiences for Four Decades
University arts programs across the country serve not merely to educate the next generation of actors, creative writers, dancers, singers, musicians and visual artists, they also serve as bridges and gateways to the communities in which they are situated. This reality undoubtedly played a significant role in UH President Renu Khator’s designation of the arts at the University of Houston as one of the “Big Rocks.”

Initially conceptualized as foundational pillars upon which the University would elevate its reputation and visibility as a Tier One University, “Big Rock” initiatives, which include the arts, have allowed the University to align its established and potential programmatic strengths with areas of growth and strengths in the greater Houston metropolitan area. By identifying these initiatives for further investment, UH has positioned itself to claim its role as a significant contributor to future cultural, economic and social expansion in the region.

With a growing and vibrant arts community in Houston and surrounding communities, the arts programs at UH play a vital role as incubators of expertise and talent to support the continued growth and expansion of local cultural arts programming. The vibrancy of the local arts scene was recently confirmed in a study jointly sponsored by the University of Houston and the Houston Arts Alliance. This groundbreaking study, “The Creative Economy in Houston,” concluded that Houston has one of the fastest growing creative economies in the country. It further noted the need for education and training to maintain and expand the creative sector in our large and burgeoning city.

In developing both creative and technical expertise to fuel a growing creative economy not only locally but also nationally, UH presents arts students with a decided advantage. Our students are given the opportunity to study with some of the most creative and talented faculty in the country. These faculty members, most of whom are practicing artists themselves, play a significant role in providing students with the knowledge and skills to become exceptional performers of their crafts and eventual leaders in their fields. Through internships and other cooperative arrangements with local cultural institutions, our students also gain real-world experience by working with and learning from practicing artists and other creative professionals.

The arts, however, figure in another important way in the effort to align University and area strengths in productive and synergistic ways. As an institutional priority, the designation of the arts as a “Big Rock” initiative

UH Arts: Enriching, Entertaining, Educating

by John W. Roberts
also recognized that UH is not only one of the most diverse universities in the country, it is also situated in one of America’s most diverse cities. In significant ways, our arts programs have, and continue to play, a pivotal role in the University’s effort to highlight diversity as one of our and the nation’s most important assets.

Through our arts curriculum and engagement in performances, productions, exhibitions, and other arts events and activities, our students, faculty and audiences are exposed to new ways of thinking and conceptualizing the arts in a societal and world context where diversity is rapidly becoming the norm. The arts serve as forums for engendering mutual respect, an appreciation of differences, and cross-cultural understanding for success in all facets of life within our University and beyond. Through our curriculum and programming, the experiences of our students and audiences are enriched as we actively, and with conscious intention, engage in an exchange of ideas, perspective and experiences that represent all voices as well as the diverse artistic and creative communication that reflect our global community.

As one of the most important points of access and exchange between the campus and the community, the UH Arts Initiative serves as a model of community and institutional engagement. In ways different from most other academic programs at the University, the vitality of our arts programs depends on public engagement and support to fulfill its educational and pedagogical mission. The presence of supportive patrons at creative performances, exhibitions, recitals and other public events contributes to the economic viability of university arts programs and, thereby, ensures the maintenance of these culturally enriching activities for enjoyment and study by future generations. In turn, patrons are afforded access to activities and programs that provide cultural enrichment and entertainment that contribute to the quality of life in our community.

*Roberts is dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences.*
Celebrity watchers were in for a treat a couple of years ago when a team of prominent entertainers who learned their craft at the University of Houston returned to take part in an alumni event called “An Afternoon with the Artists.” Onstage were Dennis Quaid, Cindy Pickett, Robert Wuhl and Brett Cullen.

While that was certainly an impressive lineup of talent, with such TV and screen credits as “Batman,” “Ferris Bueller,” “ArliSS,” “West Wing” and “The Right Stuff” among their accomplishments, it was hardly comprehensive. Those particular “artists” might have been joined by...

“Big Bang Theory” super-geek Jim Parsons... Brent Spiner, best known as Data from “Star Trek: Next Generation”... That other Quaid, Randy... His former comedy partner and “Raising Arizona” star Trey Wilson... Fresh from “House of Cards,” Derek Cecil... Loretta Devine, from “Dreamgirls” stage fame and “Grey’s Anatomy”... and TV veterans Larry “Hogan’s Heroes” Hovis and Peter “Big Valley” Breck, to mention a few.

On the musical side, notable Cougar alums range from country stars like Larry Gatlin to hip-hop luminaries like Paul Wall and Grammy-winning Chamillionaire. Falling somewhere in between was Townes Van Zandt, who became a folk music icon, along with jazz and cabaret standouts Billy Stritch and Sharon Montgomery. Of course, leading this list would be Kenny Rogers, who studied at UH before a tremendous music career filled with hits like “The Gambler,” “Lucille” and many others. And, for the technically inclined, you could include the incomparable Lyle Lovett, who received an honorary degree from UH in 2010.

Deserving a category of his own is Tommy Tune, the multi-talented Broadway performer who has won a long string of Tony awards as actor, choreographer, dancer, singer and director of seemingly countless productions on the New York stage.

From a literary perspective, along with the renowned Donald Barthelme, UH can also lay claim to such successful writers as Thomas Cobb (“Crazy Heart”), sci-fi standout Gene Wolfe (“Book of the New Sun”), William J. Cobb (“Goodnight, Texas”), crime writer Kathryn Casey (“Singularity”), Alice Sebold (“Lovely Bones”) and the highly respected poet Vassar Miller.

On the artistic front, perhaps the highest profile alumni would be Julian Schnabel, who combined his success as an avant-garde painter with forays into moviemaking, directing such films as “Basquiat” and “The Diving Bell and the Butterfly.” And The Art Guys (Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth) have built a reputation based on simultaneously spoofing and saluting the world of fine arts.

Showbiz buffs and culture aficionados can rattle off dozens of others, of course... such as comedian Bill Hicks... “All the President’s Men” producer Walter Coblenz... Songstress Sally Mayes... Best-selling self-help author Brene Brown... Sax man Tony Campise... Opera singer (and “America’s Got Talent” runner-up) Barbara Padilla... Fashion designer Victor Costa... Composer Christopher Theofanidis... Romance novelist Shane Bolks... Poet Pattiaann Rogers... Rapper Lil’ Wayne... Animated voice actor (“Spongebob Squarepants”) Greg Baldwin... Pianist Yvar Mikhashoff... Architect and fashion designer Laura Bennett...

As UH continues to produce Creative Coogs, it is a list that grows longer every day.

—Mike Emery & Eric Gerber
‘SPOILING PAPER’:
BARTHELME MEMORIES

by Padgett Powell

Editor’s Note: Post-modernist writer Donald Barthelme studied journalism at UH before achieving international acclaim for experimental works like “Snow White” and “Come Back, Dr. Caligari.” In 1979, he returned to UH as a faculty member and co-founder of the Creative Writing Program. Padgett Powell, his student, became a successful novelist – his first work “Edisto” was nominated for the American Book Award – who now teaches at the University of Florida. In an unorthodox tribute, Powell recalls Barthelme’s influence on him …and countless other writers.

My time at the University of Houston had a couple of remarkable moments. One was teaching Doug Drabek remedial English, which he technically did not need, and at his invitation going to the stadium and watching him fan The University of Texas, at the time I believe (ranked) #1, and later seeing Doug pitch in the big leagues and telling everyone, “I taught that boy on the mound the simple sentence,” which was a lie.

Another moment – after languishing in the writing program for a year and being told my writing was “jimcrack and corn” by a teacher who did not deign to shake hands – was meeting Donald Barthelme, who shook hands, and who wrote in the margins of that same writing “erstaz Faulkner,” then crossed the comment out on the grounds he “didn’t know if [I] could take it.” I told him he still did not know if I could take it, that he was never to withhold a comment from me, what was the big deal, it was supposed to be ersatz Faulkner, and that I was not here to be coddled and be told I was a writer and write a thesis, that I came here to meet women, and if I had to write something it would not be a thesis but a book. “By all means,” he said, chuckling – and that if we ever had to do this manuscript thing again it would not be in this barren office it would be in a bar, and Don Barthelme closed the manuscript and we adjourned, if not then, soon, to a bar. We got along.

Here are six things I learned from Donald Barthelme, the hiring of whom by UH ranks in my mind with Princeton's hiring of Einstein:

1. **DB:** Okay, we have wacky mode. What must wacky mode do?
   **We:** [Silent, clueless, sitting on our hands]
   **DB:** Break their hearts. Class dismissed.

**Observation**
The obligation to supply emotion is not lessened in the experimental mode, it is heightened if it is different.

2. **MB (Marion Barthelme, Donald’s wife):** Don, there was a strange boy at the door today, somehow menacing—
   **DB:** Was there a linoleum knife in his pocket?

3. **MB:** Don, the neighbor’s dog nipped Katherine today.
   **DB:** Does she warrant it not rabid?

4. **DB:** I spoiled a lot of paper before anyone got interested.
   **Student:** How much?
   **DB:** [having moved on, taking a sip of vodka tonic] What?
   **Student:** [breathless] How much paper did you spoil?
   **DB:** Boxcar. [Sip] Two boxcar.

5. **At the typewriter overlooking the street, with circular water stains from wine-glass stem on the wood of the desk, Don Barthelme wrote of seeing early joggers running toward “rude, red health.”**

**Observation (regarding lessons two to five):**
The main strategy is to say something new using two syllables or two words not heard in a while, perhaps never heard together, perhaps not heard before.

6. **DB:** Give them a clean, perfect manuscript.

**Observation**
A good editor will stop reading if you show her a usage error or a typo.