

Art is essential, not extra

Randi Weingarten, President
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I spent time this summer with impoverished bohemian artists, a murderous barber and people accused of practicing witchcraft—all during one mesmerizing opera- and musical theater-filled weekend in Central New York. Like me, aficionados of the musical arts from near and far make the annual summer pilgrimage to Cooperstown—not only to the Baseball Hall of Fame, but to The Glimmerglass Festival. The festival's mission is to offer opera enthusiasts great art in an idyllic lakeside setting, as well as to cultivate such enthusiasm in new and nontraditional audiences—dispatching performers to schools, houses of worship and even one of the state's highest-security prisons.

Francesca Zambello, the remarkable artistic and general director of The Glimmerglass Festival, calls this her “cultural crusade.” Children as young as 10 from neighboring towns take the stage in the festival's youth chorus. Promising performers from across the globe get valuable training and

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exposure through the Young Artists Program, for ages 20 to 30. Colorblind recruiting and casting was a hallmark of the festival's productions long before “Hamilton” made its debut.

Zambello is especially drawn to works that illuminate relevant social issues, one of the ways she makes connections with people who might sooner drink hot sauce than attend opera. Hence, her selections for this summer's festival include “La Bohème,” “Sweeney Todd” and “The Crucible.” Themes first explored in earlier eras remain relevant today—extreme wealth and poverty, the darkness of revenge, and fear stoked into frenzy that causes people to turn on each other.

These experiences stimulate my mind and feed my soul. And they steel my conviction that the arts must be a part of every community and every school. The arts can anchor a community and connect people who otherwise might not feel a common bond. Culture can also drive economic revitalization; The Glimmerglass Festival's \$8 million budget plants a \$21 million footprint in the region. And the benefits of children's exposure to the arts are numerous and well-established.

The arts can develop confidence and competence in students who haven't found success in other academic subjects. They promote creativ-

ity and self-directed learning. They engage students—who, with access to the arts, have better attendance, report less boredom, and are more likely to stay in school and do better in school. High school students who take arts classes have higher math and verbal SAT scores. Exposure to the arts has even been shown to affect young people's values, making them more tolerant and empathetic.

For at-risk students who have access to the arts, the advantages are striking. They tend to have better academic results, including being 10 percent more likely to complete a high school calculus course and three times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree. And they are more civically engaged, with higher levels of volunteering, voting and engagement with local or school politics.

Yet since 2001, due to both budget cuts and the era of high-stakes testing, which skewed the curriculum to tested subjects, there has been a decline in school-based arts education. And the Department of Education found that the schools most likely *not* to offer arts instruction have the highest levels of at-risk students.

I'm encouraged that the movement to expand STEM into STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) is gaining traction. But we need more than a sound bite; we need substantial and ongoing investment and commitment at every level—federal, state, district and school.

The arts are vital for everyone. Art can soothe us. And it can stretch us—by exposing us to concepts

we've never imagined before, or by leading us to wrestle with ambiguity, multiple interpretations, or artistic expression that we find jarring. A play, a song, a poetry slam or a sculpture can be the launching pad to stimulate conversations about humanity. The arts can combat indifference, ignorance and polarization. Art can transport us from the day-to-day and show us that its value does not lie in its utility.

Which brings me back to the high-security prison. Zambello had seen a documentary on life at the Attica Correctional Facility, and soon she was conceiving an innovative plan to bring world-class music to an institution that, by its very nature, involves more punishment than inspiration. After working with prison officials, Zambello, a minimal crew and the three principal singers from the Glimmerglass production of “Macbeth” did just that. The audience was rapt and, after the finale, leapt to their feet, only to be ordered by guards to remain seated. The performance was followed by a question-and-answer session and, at the inmates' urging, concluded with one last song and rapturous applause. (“The best audience we had all summer,” one of the performers said.)

Everyone needs the arts.

The Glimmerglass Festival's understated logo depicts two small ripples. That's fitting, given its magical lakeside location, except that the ripples this artistic endeavor is sending forth are anything but small.



Scene from The Glimmerglass Festival's world premier youth opera, “Wilde Tales.”

Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival

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