



Worcester performing arts: **Too** white **bread?**

**A tale of bruised egos,
Boston bluebloods
and the Massachusetts
cultural pot of gold**

Right now in some posh Back Bay high-rise, behind closed doors, the board members of the Massachusetts Cultural Council are laughing. They are sitting in a room that smells of cigars and after-dinner cognac and they're laughing at the rubes in Worcester who want funding for their pathetic, misguided attempts at art. And once the laughter stops and the council members catch their breath, they will smugly agree to send them some obligatory pittance. Throw the yokels a bone.

By Jeff Hinkle

"It's a wonderful image," says Donald Melville in a varnished English accent, "but it's simply not true. It's not true because it would be wrong."

For the past 20 years, former Norton Company CEO Melville has been Worcester's sole representative on the 19-member Cultural Council board of directors. The suggestion that such a clandestine scene might transpire makes him laugh. "I wouldn't have any part of it," he says.

Maybe, but many in the Worcester performing arts community suspect that just such a scenario

does occur. They have long complained that Melville and the other council members frequently overlook grants to Worcester. They say the city is under-represented and under-funded. They believe the process to determine who gets what is purely political — one favoring the blue-blooded, politically correct tastes of Boston's elite.

The Massachusetts Cultural Council was officially formed in 1990, following the merger of two state agencies — the Massachusetts Arts Lottery Council and the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities. The available funding for the council has fluctuated in past years according to the economy's strength and the whims of state politicians.

The MCC's current budget is \$17.3 million — which is all awarded by the state Legislature. An additional \$500,000 in federal money is given to the council by the National Endowment for the Arts.

More than \$15 million of that money will be distributed this year throughout the state in an effort to "promote excellence, access, education and diversity in the arts ... to improve the quality of life for all Massachusetts residents ..." according to the MCC's mission statement.

Nearly 600 applications were received by the

MCC for this fiscal year. They came from individuals, groups, schools and communities across the state all vying for a slice of that \$15 million pie. Should funding be awarded, the recipient can count on that sum each year for three years; after that, the applicant must reapply.

Melville says that in past years, as many as 30 percent of the grant requests were turned down by the MCC. But the MCC's budget has grown in recent years, thanks to the solid economy, and as a result 87 percent of this year's applications have been approved. (see related listing, page 14.)

Applying for money is a demanding — some say grueling — process. Applicants complete a questionnaire that fills more than 40 pages. Photos, audiotapes or videotapes are also requested. A peer evaluation from another artist representing the MCC — one preferably from out-of-state, to avoid conflicts of interest — is also required. Candidates then wait while the application, materials and evaluation pass through the bureaucratic grind of panel and board member review.

Melville has heard 20 years' worth of complaints from artists and organizations that failed to get the big artistic subsidies they were hoping for.

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He has been accused of favoring pet projects in Worcester, such as museums; projects that, as a result, realize larger grants. It is a claim he denies. At least once a year, he says, he tries to attend local musical and theatrical productions. To the suggestion that Worcester's creative efforts are looked down upon by the MCC board members, he says "I have no comment, other than to say that I'm sure it's true that there are artists who *think* that."

In fact, Melville insists, an array of criteria is considered before the MCC grants funding. "We look at the quality of management. We look at fiscal soundness, the community outreach of the program and cultural diversity. But the most important thing we consider is the program's overall excellence."

That last gauge is troubling to many. Excellence is an elusive measurement and a poor determination of funding, they say.

"It is very subjective," admits Melville. "But I don't know anything in the world that isn't subjective. Do you?"

Paul Levenson is executive director of the Central Massachusetts Symphony Orchestra. In the last three years Levenson has made three applications to the MCC for funding, only to be turned down each time.

"We receive great corporate support," says Levenson. "We receive foundation grants; but the MCC is the only organization that has kicked us in the face repeatedly."

The experience, Levenson says, has left him feeling disenfranchised by his own state.

Levenson objects to the MCC's reliance on an indefinable measurement of "quality" when it comes to endowments. "The cultural commission hides behind this shield of 'quality.' Who gets to decide what is quality? We've performed with Pavarotti, and he doesn't perform with anything less than quality."

Marc Smith, executive producer and artistic director of Worcester's Foothills Theatre, has been dealing with the MCC and its pre-merger incarnations for nearly as long as Melville has occupied his post.



PATRICK J. O'CONNOR

Marc and Susan Smith of Foothills Theatre.

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— Marc Smith, Foothills Theatre

"It [the MCC] was a political animal right from the get-go," says Smith.

It wasn't the "quality" category but the "cultural diversity" category that hobbled Smith's theater last year. An MCC panelist determined that a recent Foothills production successfully attracted African American audiences, but they offered little promise of maintaining that audience segment as regulars. The result: The theater received a \$2,000 grant. "They have millions of dollars to distribute and they gave us \$2,000. That's an insult," says Smith.

Last November, Dianne Williamson gave Levenson and Smith prominence in her

Telegram & Gazette column, questioning the MCC's support of local venues. Under the headline: "Board Wants To See Color, No Matter Who Lives Here," Williamson interviewed them and other local artists who had failed to measure up to standards of the "oh-so-correct Massachusetts Cultural Council."