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Wexner Center leader envisions the future, considers the past

By: **Michael Grossberg**

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Next week will mark a milestone in the evolution of central Ohio's arts and cultural scene: the 25th anniversary of the Wexner Center for the Arts.

For many of those years, Sherri Geldin has been thinking about the center's distinctive mission and guiding its diverse creative possibilities to become realities.

Geldin, director of the center for all but the first four years after it opened on Nov. 16, 1989 on the Ohio State University campus, has interesting thoughts to share about the center's rich past and future.



Sherri Geldin, director of the Wexner Center for the Arts, celebrates her 20th year at the institution Sept. 25, 2013. She is photographed in front of a William T. Williams 1969 painting titled *Trane, Credit Line*: The Studio Museum in Harlem, Gift of Charles Cowles, New York. (Photo by Tessa Berg)

Q What's the biggest difference at the center today compared to when it opened in 1989?

A There's more contemporary, more vanguard programming.

If you consider our key programs in music, dance, theater, film and the visual arts and compare those programs to the cultural offerings today – here and at our peer institutions – I think you'd see exponential growth.

I believe the Wexner Center has led the way in that regard, helping to make Columbus a more vibrant

want to live not only in terms of jobs but in terms of their access to arts and culture. The Wexner Center is often among those civic assets that recruiters cite in persuading people (to move here) from New York or Chicago or Los Angeles.

Q When you look back at the center's first 25 years, what would you say was the biggest challenge the center faced?

A The center's greatest challenge initially was to define itself in this community. In effect, the challenge was to create an appetite and build an appetite for more contemporary cultural programming.

Q Some people still view the Wexner Center as a place not for them but for elitist art rather than populist or mass-appeal entertainment. How do you deal with that perception?

A Across our programs, there's a recognition that different forms of performances exhibits appeal to different constituencies.

What we've worked really hard to do is encourage people to step outside their comfort zone and trust the institution.

Audiences come to something more familiar or populist... but we encourage them to also come here and we find they will trust something that isn't so familiar to them.

Oftentimes, the notion of elitism is misconstrued as somehow obscure or exclusionary. The only elite aspect to the kinds of programs we do goes to the heart of the positive side of "elite" - which is superior quality, the best of the best.

Q But how do you balance more esoteric exhibits, concerts and performance pieces at the Wexner Center with fare that is more accessible? I mean, not everyone is willing to try the Wexner Center equivalent of a Thomas Pynchon novel.

A We don't refrain from challenging our audiences but we also don't feed them a steady diet of difficult programs.

It's really about capturing and attracting to Columbus those artists or arts ensembles with a mission to explore new media and new modes of practice. We never aim to be intentionally challenging nor do we refrain from a superior piece of art or theater or dance that is challenging.

Once upon a time, the Impressionists were loathed by the public and the critics. As a contemporary arts institution, we strive to demonstrate that there is a continuum of creative process that goes back to the dawn of time.

The new and the strange are always difficult for people. Let's face it.

But there's nothing isolated about the art being made today. It's all evolving from the creative efforts of everyone who has come before. It's nothing to be afraid of.

Q The center has brought in giants in their fields but also nurtured young talent. How do you strike the balance?

A Andy Warhol, Annie Liebovitz and other artists (that the center has featured in exhibits and/or appearances) are at the top of their field, artists doing extraordinary work.

But we also like to discover artists at an earlier point in their career.

For every Martin Scorsese (*The Departed*, *Hugo*, *The Aviator*, *Casino*, *Goodfellas*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*) or Milos Forman (*Amadeus*, *Hair*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*) or Phillip Kaufman (*Quills*, *The Right Stuff*, *Hemingway & Gellhorn*) we present, we present a Todd Haynes (*I'm Not There*, *Poison*, *Safe*, *Far From Heaven*) before anyone has heard of them.

We recently had (film director) Richard Linklater for his new film *Boyhood*. Well, Rick was here 14 years ago when he was much less of a household name. We presented a retrospective of his films (*Before Sunrise*, *Before Midnight*) and we had him come and speak.

Q How has the Wexner Center evolved under your tenure?

A When I came here in 1993, it wasn't so commonplace for institutions to have artistic residences. If they did, it was episodic and fairly modest, whereas residencies have been at the core of the Wexner Center's mission from its inception.

Matching that has been a robust financial commitment, with annual budgets of about \$10 million.

Q How would you describe the Wexner Center's public image today?

A The truth of the matter is I like to leave the description of the public image to our public... I hope that what people have come to expect is adventurous and exceedingly high-quality artistic programming in all different fields of creative expression.

world, sometimes in collaboration with major national and international institutions.

Q How do you think the Wexner Center is viewed nationally - outside Columbus?

A Our fierce commitment to being a catalyst to creating new works and supporting artists in their research and experimentation has made a big impact on the field.

In some respects, the very nature of our program encompassing artists – and often collaboration with institutions outside of this area – has helped to further that image.

From its inception, the scope of ambition that the Wexner Center has pursued has included artists of national and international import as well as local import.

The Wexner Prize has been awarded to nationally and internationally recognized artists. Our visibility also has been raised by the artists in residence that we've had over the years in film and video, performing arts and visual arts. They hail from across the country and globally.

The programs themselves have always reached for a level of artistic and intellectual rigor that first-tier museums, performing arts centers and film centers would aspire to.

The center's goal is to be among the most acclaimed arts institutions and to set its sights accordingly.

Q How do you see the center's key role and mission today?

A In some ways, the Wexner Center is a kind of experimental institution.

The center is finding the sweet spot between a highly rigorous, high-quality and adventurous program and what the public would find intriguing and engaging.

We hope there are people who will take a chance on the unknown.



Kyle Miller, an Ohio State sophomore chemical engineering major, walks between the Wexner Center for the Arts and the Mershon Auditorium to the Fine Arts Library on the Ohio State campus on March 25, 2014. (Dispatch photo by Kyle Robertson)

Q Looking ahead, what is the biggest challenge the center faces as it enters its next 25 years?

A For any institution, as it reaches a bit of maturity, the challenge is to remain fresh and keep an open mind about how we go about doing the work we do.

The challenge is not to get too comfortable... We want to keep challenging ourselves.

Q How have changes in technology and in Columbus affected the Wexner Center?

A It's fair to say, there are so many more cultural activities available in Columbus than there were 25 years ago. People also are consuming culture in such different ways that one wants to remain relevant.

It does my heart proud when I see 900 people show up for an outdoor film screening knowing that they could be sitting in front of a six-inch monitor watching the same film. But experiencing the art form in the way it was meant to be experienced in a communal environment underscores the ongoing relevance of arts institutions.

Q Any new directions or ventures for the center?

A We want to be not just a social hub and gathering place and marketplace for ideas and experiences, but actively part of the problem-solving in the communities.

The Weinland Park Storybook project is one example of reaching out to the community to bring resources – financial, human, professional and creative – to a community very much in transition.

That's a place where the Wexner Center can increasingly play a role.