

THE ARTS CAN PROVIDE A NEW IMAGE

Providence has an image problem. Whether one asks a state resident or a Providence native about our capital city, the response is usually negative. And the image of our city held by non-Rhode Islanders is one that should not make us proud.

After having done some work in Lowell, Massachusetts, one hot summer's day, I stopped at a bar for a cold drink. When I identified myself as coming from Providence, one bar patron asked, "Are you a ^{hit} ^{man}?"

When attending a reception recently at the home of a refined and cultured lady in South Carolina at which there was a large number of academics, again I identified myself as coming from Providence, and one person asked, "Do you work for the mob?"

This image of the city as a center for mob activity is perpetuated by the news media when, for example, a recent issue of the New York Times devoted a quarter page story to a reputed head of organized crime. The story stated that "... Providence, a city of 156,000 on Narragansett Bay, has long been the headquarters of organized crime in New England."

Rhode Islanders do not think highly of their capital city. A recent survey, drawn from a sample of 23 communities and 81 percent of the state's population, singled out this negative image of Providence, with 72 percent of state residents and 57 percent of Providence residents claiming that the city was only a poor to fair place in which to live. In fact, only one question of 12 raised about the city elicited a favorable response from more than one-half of the respondents: 54 percent said that Providence was excellent to good as "a place for a variety of cultural and social events."

Whether [the 12 responses to the Providence questions] ^{people} are right or wrong is not the ~~question~~ ^{issue}; rather it is the fact that local people perceive the city in a negative sense, and as long as this image persists, the city will suffer. [Can anything be done to change this image?]

One of the most exciting aspects of Providence, as in many other cities, is the resurgence of the arts, a point recognized by survey respondents. Three years ago a gamble was taken to revitalize an old downtown theater for a performing arts center. The success of that venture is measured in the latest annual report of the Ocean State Performing Arts Center which reports healthy growth, profits, and an attendance [that was equal to about one of five people *out* in the state.]

It was also just three years ago that the Tony award-winning Trinity Square Repertory Company was on the verge of closing its doors, but with vigorous support and expertise from the business community, the last two years have become financially profitable. With performances averaging 85 percent of the theater's capacity, the attendance for the past year was equal to about one of every seven people in the state.

The arts in Providence are more than just these two successful operations. Each of the five colleges in the city makes its own contribution to the cultural scene, and when three of them join for a cooperative Shakespeare venture, the community is made richer by the effort. Other art, music, and dance activities, whether performed by the Providence Opera Theater or the Barker Playhouse, further enhance the cultural life of the community and, increasingly, help foster the image of Providence as a ~~an~~ ^{an} arts center for the arts.

The recent extravaganza of the Aida performance in Hartford that brought

a cast of 1,000 together, filled the 11,000 seat Civic Center for three nights, and generated national media coverage served dramatically to single out that city's efforts to bring opera to masses of people rather than just a select few. Such events, although noteworthy, do not necessarily develop a new image of a city; rather it is the day-to-day activities in a community that, over time, make people aware of the uniqueness of the city and, subsequently, develop an image that spreads beyond the city and state. Such activities might include having sculpture in barren office lobbies; frequent arts festivals with a variety of sponsors and performers; adding color, murals, and art work to the dingy facades of blank building walls; and requiring contributions from developers who construct new buildings for the purpose of adding art work to the buildings.

The arts, our cultural resources, do more than just satisfy our aesthetic needs; they can also contribute to economic development. Sometimes described as an "industry," these cultural resources have been characterized as people magnets, i.e., centers of attraction; labor intensive, because they make great use of people rather than machines; small businesses, ^{which} ~~and they~~ help other businesses through purchase of goods and services; and ~~they are~~ environmentally sound.

The arts mean income and jobs; they mean aesthetics and beauty; they mean pride and self-expression; and they mean image. Would that Providence be known as a city devoted to the arts, where paintings and sculptures in public places abound and where performances of ^{theater, dance,} ~~opera~~ symphony, and festivals are the norm. [This historical and architecturally exciting city could then justifiably be thought of as a city devoted to the mind rather than the mob.]

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