

New experience (\$) artists must seek

By Garrison Keillor

As recently as 10 years ago, or last Tuesday for that matter, Minnesota was widely thought of as a hotbed of philistinism, dominated by small-minded shopkeepers and farmers who wouldn't know culture if it came up and asked, "Which way to New York?"

Since then, however, Minnesota has become a high-quality state, the arts have doubled and many arts administrators predict another 100-percent jump in the next decade. A recent poll showed that two out of three residents have had an intense arts experience in the past year. Most of them said they'd

like to have another. My own feeling about arts growth is that it's real good. I do wonder, though, what happened to all the Minnesotans who used to not like art. The ones who thought painting was for chimpanzees and didn't understand music and hated poetry and just went to Hollywood movies and danced the polka. Are they lying in the bushes waiting to jump on art? Or did they all move to South Dakota?

Imagine my surprise when I was invited to address a Philistine Society seminar on the arts in a large downtown hotel Tuesday evening. I was paid \$500 for a brief talk, and I sure

hope I'm invited back next year. It was very educational.

I learned, first of all, that the Philistines are a fraternal organization that goes back thousands of years. As most of us know, they were smitten (or smoted) by King David back when smiting was more than a mere slap on the wrist. However, they have changed over the years, and now they are totally dedicated to civic improvement.

For example, they recently established a program to enable business executives to take a year off and enrich themselves. For example, one vice-president recently spent a year in Greece. They also offer excellent life-insurance policies to members at reasonable rates.



Geri Joseph
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Those just-held primary elections left behind an encouraging political message: Women, at last, may be coming into their own. Comparatively speaking, that is. Even without a careful count, it is clear that in a number of states women succeeded where party pros said they could not, and they moved toward political offices unapproached in the past.

Some primary results were dramatic. In New York, the official Democratic nominee for lieutenant governor is the first woman ever chosen for nomination to statewide office. In Maryland, an experienced party worker, Louise Gore, beat Rep. Lawrence Hogan for the Republican nomination for governor. And in Nevada, another Republican woman won an unexpected victory to become the party's gubernatorial candidate.

Even in primaries for so-called lesser offices, women upset party stalwarts in more ways than one. In Minnesota, for example, two young women, taking a first-time plunge into elective politics, became DFL legislative candidates by defeating two men with a total of 28 years of legislative experience.

Obviously, one set of primary elections does not establish a large and permanent place in politics for women candidates. But it does seem safe to conclude that public offices at all levels are no longer for men only. Not in the minds of voters or, equally important, in the minds of women.

That should be good news for all those groups working for more political participation by women. Surprisingly, though, the influx of women candidates does not gladden the hearts of feminist leaders. For them, attitudes and issues count, not mere numbers and not just any woman no matter how able she may be. The odd truth is that many feminists regard the political success of some women as a setback, not a gain.

The Minnesota DFL Feminist Caucus holds that point of

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'Are we in the Mother Goose or Rembrandt lot?'

ject, and that just makes it harder to get the funding we need if the arts are to survive at all."

He told me that I was an unusually sensitive person with a good education and extraordinary talent. "If everybody was like you, we'd have no problems," he said. "But they aren't. The average guy on the street still thinks of the arts as pessimistic. Dark, moody, showing the bad side of man without showing the good side. Showing our problems without suggesting any solutions."

"When it's not moody, it's crazy. It goes off the deep end about a blade of grass or a meadowlark or some other thing that you and I know can be very meaningful but the average guy thinks is just dumb. So the arts have an image problem there, and what do we do about it?"

The answer, he said, is to demonstrate the effectiveness of the arts in terms that the average guy can understand. What we do, he said, is demonstrate that the artist is effective at getting money.

"The average guy thinks of the artist as this weird person who creeps around town in his velvet cape having experiences. He looks down on the artist

as a loser who doesn't know enough to be a messenger boy."

"But let's say the artist gets a big grant — \$10,000 — to spend a year creating art. The average guy is going to have more respect for him. And then the artist sells that art to a big corporation for even more money. He is going to respect him even more. And then the artist is paid even more to come and talk about his art during business hours. At that point, the average guy will consider going into art himself."

Of course, we're a long way from that point. Most artists lack my flair for communicating and don't command the big speaking fee that I do. Most artists are poor.

The opportunity, however, is there. The arts are growing. An artist who gets in now and works hard will be in the way for rapid advancement. A man with the right qualifications can go right to the top.

Take me, for example. I am not one of those writers who runs off to the woods to find himself. I know where I am and that's right here where the action is. And I understand that next year the

State Arts Council is going to name a state writer, and that, of the three or four people in the running for it, I'm well out in front.

As state writer, I will have major responsibility for providing literary input to state government and generally improving the prose style of state officials. I will be empowered to name towns, cities, lakes, rivers, dams, and highways. I will be responsible for the inscriptions on all state buildings, not to mention the state song lyrics and the state motto.

I will also read to the governor before he goes to bed, and once a year I will be taken around the state in a large truck so people can look at me. Finally, I will act as an ombudsman to handle writers' complaints against Minnesota.

Myself, I don't have any. Nor do I intend to. I have been treated very well and will be treated even better, and the next time a writer tees off against this area and its people, he is going to have to answer to yours truly.

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