



**District of Columbia
Arts Center**

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DCAC Archive : Director's Letters May : June 2010

As Cuisine des Artistes draws near, I start thinking about what I want to say when I introduce the Herb White Award. The award was created to honor someone in the arts community who has contributed for a long time without fanfare or reward. And there are lots of people in that category in this town. Our recipient, Don Russell, is certainly one of them. It is named after Herb because it is only through his generosity that DCAC even exists today. From our inception in 1989 until his death in 2007 Herb donated our facility rent-free. Can you imagine, prime real estate in the heart of Adams Morgan at no cost? He believed that, even as a fledgling organization, if the cost of our building was covered that we could create enough revenue to pay the utilities, run the organization and create art. And we have. He was right. Fortunately, his family shares his faith in us and art and continues to donate the space to this day. That was just one of the things Herb did to support art and its creators in Washington. The list is long , and many people are indebted to him, but you never really heard too much about it. He was just a generous, larger than life art patron who had a penchant for parties.

Generosity becomes my watchword here. My mentor, Ingemar Lindh, was very concerned with the idea of art and hospitality, and generosity plays a large part in that. As artists, we invite people to participate in our creation with us. It is not a private thing, it is very much a public activity, and it only thrives when we have other people engaging with it and us. So, as artists, we too have to be generous. When working with my colleagues in Theatre Du Jour I talk about it as, "creating an opening for the audience to enter." To my thinking, if we don't expressly offer this invitation then there is a possibility that the viewer will withdraw, not engage with us, and that's not where I want to be with our performance. Especially since most of our work is experimental and not always so easily approached. So we find ways of being "artistically generous" and inviting our audience into our creation. I think it's super important for the audience to know that they are a part of the action, that we created this for them to see and not just for our own jollies.

And it begets generosity, too. Because art patrons can be selfish. Many come from the school of "I don't know anything about art, but I know what I like." I always doubt this when I hear it, I think more likely they really have no idea what they might like but have really strong ideas about what they don't like. Either way, it's a big hurdle to get over, to encourage them to embrace the idea that whether or not you like it, you can still engage with it, still get something out of it. And when someone will actually let go and take your artistic ride with you for better

or for worse, that's their generosity coming through. They don't have to do it, but for some reason they do, and I believe that reason is that they sense the personal invitation, the generosity of the artist.

Now, you might be reading this and thinking to yourself: "Geez, what a lot of hooley. What kind of love drug is this guy on? Does he really think that Mark Rothko and Peter Handke are generous, inviting artists who care about drawing in their audience?" Well, you make a valid point; there are definitely some artists and some work out there that seems uninviting. Many had that criticism of our production of Antonin Artaud's *There Is No More Firmament*, it was just too much: too much sound, too much chaos, too much everything. How can that be inviting? Where is our generosity then? I will suggest that even in the most difficult work there is a generosity, but perhaps it is difficult to see or find. Just because I say there is an opening for the audience doesn't mean that you can drive a train through it. Just because you are invited doesn't mean I'm going to send a limo for you.

Sometimes it takes a steady look to see your opening, to find that discreet place where it's clear you should enter. It may have caveats, it may have requirements, and you may not like where it leads once you're there, but hey, it was worth the shot. For me, that whole process smacks of generosity, both on the part of the artist and the viewer. Once that little interchange has happened, we can go on to present ideas, make criticisms, laugh, and reflect, and so on. But we all have to get over that first little hurdle together. It's a quiet, unspoken exchange, and it can lead to great artistic experiences. Well, and some not so great, too. I'm not suggesting this generosity leads to good art, hell, people have been very generously offering me onions and beets my whole life and I still don't like them.

My point in all this dribble is that generosity is a big deal and needs to be recognized sometimes. It is at the root of the artistic exchange between the creator and the audience. It's quiet and discreet and never gets talked about much, but it's the thread that weaves the whole thing together. That's why for me, when we give out the Herb White Award, generosity is the first thing that comes to my mind. I know how important it is both in my artistic world and in my larger practical world. That's also why I'm so glad to be presenting it to Don this year. Many of you may not know him or the great work he's done over the years. You don't see his name everywhere; he's not always in the public eye, but he's been there, giving of himself and his time. DCAC and many others benefited from Herb's generosity, and many people and organizations have benefitted from Don's. So we think it's time to thank him, and thank him we do. Not just for the work, or the time or the money, but for his generosity. It's not the things that you do that make you generous; it's the spirit with which you do it.

B Stanley,
Executive Director