

Rocco Landesman's artistic impressions after two weeks in the chair

By Robert W. Duffy, Associate editor

Posted 11 p.m. Tues. Aug. 25 — Rocco Landesman is two weeks into his new life as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, and although he is accustomed to spotlights, those that illuminate every pore of a body in Washington are different from those that shine on folks in New York, where Landesman was president of Jujamcyn Theatres and a presence for a generation on Broadway.

President Barack Obama nominated him to the chairmanship in May, and overall the appointment was met with approbation. *The New York Times* editorial page called it "good news."

"Mr. Landesman," the editorial instructed, "... brings a distinctly entrepreneurial touch at a time when so many in the nonprofit arts world are struggling to survive." The editorial added, parenthetically, "For anyone worried if he is high-brow enough, he has a doctorate from the Yale School of Drama."

The former St. Louisan, who is scion of a well-known family of artists, artistic entrepreneurs and successful businesspeople here, is animatedly optimistic about his work at the NEA and about its future as an incubator for and nurturer of American artistic culture.

In a wide-ranging conversation on the telephone with the *Beacon* on Tuesday he said it is important to remember that his boss, Barack Obama, is a writer himself — thus a commitment that extends from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue into playhouses, museums and studios is not a particularly big surprise.

"We actually have a writer in the White House," Landesman said. Because of that, he said, Obama has special empathy with artists, and is doing everything he can to express his fellow-feeling with actual dollars. He has called for an increase in funds for the endowment, even in a severely tested economy. And beyond the White House, Landesman said there is also sympathy in Congress for building up the NEA and its programs. (The budget for FY 2009 is \$155 million.)

Landesman said his job is more practicable because of such political clout behind him.

"We are starting with a real tailwind and we will take it as far as we can,"

he said. In him, Landesman said, the president appointed someone who "would pound on the table on this. It won't happen all at once. And it can't all come from government appropriations." The private sector has to join the effort, he said, and so must foundations.

CITYGARDEN MODEL

One foundation-funded project he pointed to as a model is the St. Louis Gateway

landesman

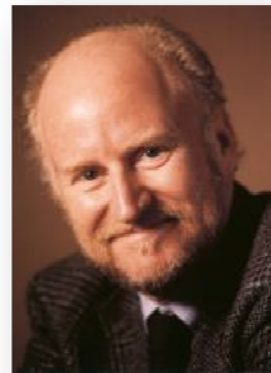


PHOTO BY MICHAEL EASTMAN

Foundation's buoyantly successful Citygarden, which opened on the Gateway Mall downtown in early July.

"One of our big conversations is about the role of art and artists in towns and cities, and in urban revitalization in terms of character, ethos and economics.

"Look at Citygarden," he said. "It is obvious when you walk around there that this plays a huge part of the revitalization of downtown. Such projects can be done around the country, bringing art into the hearts of cities and towns." While enlivening the spirits of a place, such developments also change the economics of at-risk and economically distressed urban areas, he said, emphasizing the positive role the arts collectively have in economic development.

"We are cautious about funding, but at the top the president is committed," he said.

Landesman said Michelle Obama is especially interested in strengthening arts-education programs in the schools. "There is real will there to make art important in kindergarten through grade 12 classes."

Landesman is the father of three sons, and emphatic that the arts be regarded as integral to the education of children, his and everyone else's. He said he worries about the quirky kid whose only opportunity to shine and to excel may be through artistic expression. When arts programs are missing, such boys and girls are just out of luck.

But the arts shouldn't be the exclusive property of the artistically inclined or gifted, he said. Music, the visual arts, literature, architecture — all should be part of the curriculum, period. Educating American children must be more than no-child-left-behind curricula aimed at cracking standardize tests. Creativity and imagination should be regarded as an essential part of what we call the basics.

While he is interested in big-picture programs such as arts education in the schools, he also believes the NEA has a role in encouraging and supporting the work of

individual artists. He spoke of an artist friend, St. Louis photographer Michael Eastman, whose career was jumpstarted with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The money allowed him to upgrade his photographic equipment. Among other prominent places, one of Eastman's pictures hangs in the office of Desirée Rogers, the White House social secretary, Landesman said. Rogers has made a point of bringing art and artists into the White House. Eastman's portrait of Landesman accompanies this article.

MATTER OF MERIT

Anyone in the business of soliciting funds from private donors, foundations or the government knows that the criteria used to make decisions are all over the board. Landesman said one criterion will predominate in funding decisions made in his chairmanship, which is that they be merit based, not based on geography or other less compelling criteria. He said he recognizes that putting so strong an emphasis on merit, on quality, on standards, on originality can serve to get one branded an elitist. "I am interested in determining what has value," he said.

One criticism aimed at Landesman — sort of a flip of the elitist coin — is that he is too down-market culturally to be the head of the NEA, that having produced successful shows such as "The Producers" for popular audiences on Broadway somehow disqualifies him for active participation in more refined cultural ballgames.

"I grew up in the middle of what passed for a counter culture in St. Louis," he said. His family owned the Crystal Palace in Gaslight Square, and the artistic fare there was anything but down home. "The second production of 'Waiting for Godot' was performed at the Palace," he said. And although he has made his living, and to some degree his mark, in commercial theater, he has written in *The New York Times* of the need for not-for-profit organizations to cease producing Broadway-style shows in favor of putting up more experimental, more contemporary, more challenging work.

"If you have a subsidy, you have a responsibility to do work that is more daring and riskier. The higher and best purpose of not-for-profits is not to do Broadway shows but work that has an important part in the advancement of American culture."

He refuses to be confined to what has come to be called "serious," "fine," "classical," "avant garde." He wants to do work that speaks in contemporary idioms to young people. While continued interest will be paid to traditional artistic expressions, "work in the here and now is of pressing interest and concern as well." He emphasized that the new generation of filmmakers, and creators of new media, "are very important and represent work we must be more aware of."

"Art exists outside traditional parameters and we intend to be there," he said.

'RIVER' TO 'ANGELS'

Landesman is proud of his accomplishments in the theater, critical potshots about them notwithstanding. He remembers his initial high-profile success, "Big River," which has strong St. Louis and regional resonances, as extremely important in his life. But he also is exultant about the work he did bringing the Tony Kushner's dark, gritty, complex, sharp-edged Pulitzer Prize winning drama "Angels in America" to the stage.

"I loved doing such a great work of art," he said. "There is nothing more I am more proud of than 'Angels in America.' People may react unfavorably to things that are in it, but it is, in fact, the greatest play in several generations."

Moving from Gotham to the District of Columbia can't be without challenges and culture shocks. Washington, no matter how important it is, still is perfumed with magnolia blossoms, and, especially when the weather's hot and the heat's turned off the political skillet, it seems considerably less raucus and dynamic than New York City. But as far as Landesman is concerned, life in Washington — and in the service of his country— is good, he said.

He and his wife, Debby Landesman, have moved into Georgetown and live on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. She is accomplished in her own right: She has years of experience in community affairs and philanthropy, and is a former director of the Levi Strauss Foundation.

Like her husband, she grew up in St. Louis, and along with an undergraduate degree from Notre Dame has an M.A. from the school of engineering at Washington University in St. Louis.

He's proud not only of his work in New York but also of the team he is building at the Endowment — both new women and men he has brought in and veterans in the organization who've remained in their positions.

"A great part of your whole quality of life depends on the people you encounter in your job," Landesman said. The people he sees at the Endowment — the men and women he has brought on board as well as the members of the staff who are veterans of the organization. They not only do good work, "but I also enjoy seeing them every day. That is critical."

Also critical is his independent federal agency's last name.

"Art," the endowment's chairman declares, "speaks to the best parts of us, of who we are, and of what we are, as a country."