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# Opinion

## Should Clarksburg build new cultural center or renovate Rose Garden Theater?

by Clara Gibson Maxwell

Most of my neighbors, friends and cousins know me as the child of Judge Frank J. Maxwell Jr. My mother, Susan Harnish Maxwell, was an arts advocate, while my father was instrumental in the building of the Clarksburg-Harrison Library.

My cousin, William Maxwell Davis, served for decades as a prominent arts activist in Charleston. My family goes back six generations in this neck of the woods. So, my roots here run deep.

Educated as a scholar at Harvard and as a dancer at the Juilliard School, I hope that my learning and my experience, as well as my perspective and my love for the arts and for West Virginia, may prove useful in weighing the question before our community about the creation of a cultural center, either a new building or a renovation of the Rose Garden Theater.

I've been a cultural worker my entire life. Dance is my vocation.

My point of view, however, may not appear immediately practical from the exclusive perspective of cost. But if it comes from a life in art divided between Clarksburg and Europe.

Our current economic and political outlook may seem dire, nationally and internationally. Yet our local economy is relatively robust, thanks to this current natural resource bonanza in Harrison County. It would, in my humble opinion, be a pity not to take advantage of these current circumstances and the unique opportunities they offer in order to heighten the profile of the arts in our community.

I have learned to be wary of

a plan to create a new building. My education at Lincoln Center — the ostensible American cultural model — taught me something.

My experience dealing with the French and European cultural bureaucracies educated me. Living through the construction of the Clay Center and its subsequent inability to live up to its full promise taught me something. The demise of the old American Center in Paris and the collapse of the new American Center built there educated me. The organizers of this new center declared, "Artists come and go, but the building remains" shortly before the building's definitive closure as a venerable American institution in Paris.

An institution is only as good as the people involved. Don't assume that if you build it, they will come. A business plan is just a piece of paper. Implementing a cultural plan for the arts takes ongoing grassroots organizing, grit and soul.

Permit me to share with you some thoughts I hope will prove worthy of discussion and reflection. While couched in the imperative mode, I offer these propositions as suggestions.

Put your energy and money into the formulation of a clear mission that serves the needs elaborated in the recent survey: A local cinema that is not a cineplex; a theater welcoming local, amateur festivals and fairs and a venue for country music performance and live jazz



Maxwell



Staff photo by Matt Harvey

The Robinson Grand Theater could become a cultural center.

hands opening up to local, state, regional and international guests.

Make a plan and proceed in incremental stages. If you renovate the Rose Theater, do it a little at a time in view of making it a staging point for a vibrant arts community.

Define what constitutes an important and unavoidable extravagance. This is like a covenant in a human relationship: Define what are the non-negotiable needs. This involves lively, raucous and unavoidable dissent. It is like any enduring relationship that weathers healthy conflict in order to grow constructively.

Prioritize, encourage and mentor local talent. Beware of hiring a bunch of professionals with degrees who will use their appointments here as stepping stones to advance their careers elsewhere.

The members of my largely French company had the time of their lives when we had a residency in Scottsdale, Ariz., at Taliesin West, which grew naturally and by stages in its desert setting. Its great architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, neverthe-

less declared: "Take care of the luxuries first, the staples will take care of themselves." Any daddy or momma who has shelled out the money for his or her daughter's or son's dance tutus, dance belts and ballet lessons knows what I am talking about here.

Art is priceless, yes. But there can be calculable and practical benefits that are specific, as well. For example, in my own case: I learned more from the craft co-op, West Virginia Heritage Crafts in Quiet Dell, about how they frugally squeezed every penny out of their grant from the Clarksburg-Harrison Cultural Foundation than from pretentious seminars offered by the French Ministry of Culture.

The human potential of the musicians, dancers and amateur builders is vastly underused in this beloved place. As is the passion for history, which Civil War reenactors nevertheless constantly exhibit in their enthusiasm.

Do not make this about aping the behavior of the hiring class, with sequins and ostentation:

Make the way you go about the task — be it construction, education, performance or fundraising — a noble endeavor in itself. It takes away the slog.

Keep your organization loose, open and a little spacey. Involve amateur music groups, dance schools, libraries, public school students, home-schooled kids and charter schools.

Be open to church groups while keeping an inclusive, secular mission, just like our First Amendment. Why not open an artsy gathering place/coffee bar in part of the theater building, with free parking and free Wi-Fi, should construction go ahead? Tolerate loud, ornery, rowdy adolescents on the make; they know more about new technology, and this is an utterly inestimable asset.

Do not underestimate the impact of new technology innovation. Prepare to have your world instantaneously and systematically rocked. The events in Tunisia attest to a new era in citizen journalism and activism. Why not avail ourselves of a burgeoning, new kind of public space on the Internet by making digital innovation part of your cultural mission, as well? I know I was able to perform in Mectingen and Göttingen, Germany, in 2011 and 2012, thanks to kindred spirits I found and nurtured online, not to mention the audience cultivated in these cities.

Do not waste money hiring public relations people. Shun them. Do not make your endeavor about personality, prestige or status, but instead about the integrity of the doing. That will, in itself, attract the kind of people you'll want to work with. That means doing a lot — a lot of talking, coaching and getting needed.

If one's objective is to make Harrison County a "cultural Mecca," one has to cultivate the corresponding spiritual atmosphere. That, and not endless electronic discussions, is where Twitter, e-mail, chat rooms and Facebook serve as useful tools. Make it about attracting interesting people, about openness, about an ambiance that, thanks to its vibration, creates a buzz.

Clara Gibson Maxwell is artistic director of Mon D'Amérique Productions, a multi-arts, dance-oriented production company that has been based since 1987 in Paris, France, participating in the U.S.-based Fiscal Sponsorship Program of Dance Theater Workshop since 1997. This year celebrates her 25th year as a surviving dancer-choreographer on two continents.