

An Artistic Endeavor

By RACHAEL S. KING

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Lately, an artistic flavor seems to be in the air at Columbia. From the mundane--a recent proposal for the installation of a Broadway box office in Lerner--to the remarkable--University President Lee Bollinger's creation of the job of director of University arts initiatives, and the appointment of Tony award winner Gregory Mosher to fill the new post--students are turning their thoughts away from Morningside in a way they haven't since they realized during Orientation Week that it's a whole lot easier to get drunk at the 'Stend than to go see a show at Lincoln Center.

Bollinger said at his inaugural address that Columbia should be the "the quintessential great urban university." And why not? We are situated in the quintessential great urban location. It would be hard to argue that there is a better place to attend school in terms of the diversity of cultural knowledge available at our fingertips. Many students chose Columbia over other Ivy League schools almost solely because of its location. Hopefully, this new administrative position will help us to take advantage of the city more than ever.

At the very least, Bollinger has done a lot for Columbia so far (and not merely concerning artistic endeavors) simply by raising the school's profile. Admit it: it's just fun to flip through The New York Times and see an article about what's going on at Columbia on, of all places, the front page of the Arts section. The important thing about Bollinger's emphasis on the arts--which we saw signs of in the early days of his presidency, most notably with last year's Midnight's Children festival--is that it encompasses the whole University. This acknowledges the fact that music, painting, dance, etc., are important not just for people who practice or study those fields, but for those whose areas of interest and expertise would seemingly have nothing to do with the arts.

Mosher, a legendary theatre producer and former director of Lincoln Center, also emphasizes the need for the arts to be at the forefront of thinking throughout the University. He said that this project was about making connections and "building bridges" between both the University and the arts world, and between different fields of study at Columbia. "I think that [Bollinger] has two ideas," Mosher said. "One is that as a human being, it's nuts to not have the arts be part of your life. The arts ... provide you with an interesting way of dealing with being alive. ... There's another aspect, which is: how do the arts affect your actual field of study? ... Maybe the way that artists look at the world could be really interesting to you. And that's the wide-open part. That's the part that nobody's ever tried before."

I'm going to make a leap here and say that this interconnectivity and interdependence of various fields of study is a growing trend in the University, and has a great deal to do with the recent acceptance of

the major in comparative ethnic studies, as well as with the expanding interest in such interdisciplinary fields as comparative literature and society, urban studies, and American studies. But perhaps even more than any of those disciplines, ethnic studies is focused on the relationships between different groups of people and the importance of understanding those relationships in order to have a complete understanding of society.

The fight for ethnic studies can be seen as paving the way for this new dedication to integrating the arts into Columbia. It got people talking about the ways in which we view the world and how those views are studied at the University.

We are starting to see that the old, insular departments, although obviously wonderfully equipped to make students experts in a particular field, are not enough for a global way of life in which an understanding of the relationship between disciplines is of paramount importance.

Mosher emphasized the idea of helping academic disciplines to transcend categorization through the arts. "This is not about creating showbiz, or blockbusters, or any of that," he said. "It is about a true integration of some of the greatest people in civilization, who happen to be artists. [Bollinger] thinks to be a human being is to have both [a civic life and an aesthetic life]. ... And that will be the adventure."

If Columbia truly commits itself to this project and to the project of ethnic studies--in both cases it seems there are reasons to hope it will--the adventure, as Mosher said, will be in watching the intellectual and social richness that will result.

Of course it would be cool to see major celebrities roaming around campus and giving talks and performances, or to easily get really cheap tickets to Broadway shows. But what's really cool is to see the University actually looking forward in its academic and intellectual priorities and embracing the idea that no field of study is an island unto itself and that we must understand the connections between those fields of study to fully live our lives.

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