



Speech delivered at “Best of Our State” weekend at the  
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## **North Carolina: The State of the Arts**

We live in a society that likes to explain things by putting objects, theories, and ideas into categories and looking for patterns. This helps us to plan, to assess and, most of all, to come to conclusions that give us a sense of control over the vast and otherwise confusing universes of which we are a part. I say universes because, our colleagues known as scientists have created a magnificent and creative construct that explains what we cannot perceive and cannot categorize, and that is that there are parallel universes. These universes are the Everything Else that is both unknowable but also somehow in-knowable.

The Arts. What ARE they and why is this category such a push-button word in society? Why, as I said in a speech to the Appalachian Regional Development Institute Summit, held in Boone a year and a half ago, is Art derided by politicians as frivolous and unimportant. Why are artists undervalued, unlike athletes, who are seen as heroes? Why are the arts the first thing cut from education budgets? We currently have no national standards for teaching the arts in public schools, because there is no national sense of teaching it in the first place. Where did the wisdom come from that told our leaders that what is really important is research, and training our youth to become scientists, rather than artists – as if these two categories were mutually exclusive?

With so many jobs leaving North Carolina and indeed the United States, something remains untouched. With the down turns of the world’s economy something remains stronger than ever. America is the source of it – the very center of it – and everyone in the world seems to want to be a part of it. It is exported, generating billions of dollars in goods and services and yet is practically impossible to outsource. It is, simply put, the very thing denigrated and cut out of public education: American Arts and creativity.

When we pick up Walter Isaacson’s magnificent biography of Albert Einstein, we are meant to be amazed that Einstein played the violin. “Mozart’s music is so pure and beautiful that I see it as a reflection of the inner beauty of the universe itself,” he told a friend, as quoted in Isaacson’s book. The great physicist’s son, Hans Albert, added “Whenever he felt that he had come to the end of the road or faced a difficult challenge in his work, he would take refuge in music and that would solve his difficulties.” Another friend said of Einstein, “He would often play his violin in his kitchen late at night, improvising melodies while pondering complicated problems. Then, suddenly, in the middle of playing, he would announce excitedly, ‘I’ve got it!’ As if by inspiration, the answer to the problem would have come to him in the midst of music.”

Mind you, I said we are meant to be amazed at Einstein's relationship with music and art, because we know him as perhaps the greatest, and still the most famous, scientist of the past two hundred years. What was he doing, messing around with a violin and Mozart?

As an artist, I read those passages and merely shook my head in recognition, not amazement. Einstein not only found solace in music. He found the universe in it, perfectly mirrored, simple, elegant and always changing, obeying laws that replicate the perceivable cosmos and opening our minds and souls to something infinite: those "parallel universes" later physicists needed to invent, or at least acknowledge.

Einstein's three-page paper – was there ever a better argument for short papers? – dated September 27, 1905 – came to the conclusion that mass and energy are the same thing, perceived differently. Yes: Energy equals mass times the square of the speed of light.  $E = mc^2$ . Amazing. So amazing, in fact, that everyone in this room knows the formula, even if we can't practically know what it means.

But, those of us who are primarily artists (and I will be including anyone reading this in that category, by the time this piece is done) might also know something else about the theory that time and space are the same thing. We might know that in 1882, the public experienced Richard Wagner's last opera, Parsifal. In it, the old knight of the Holy Grail, Gurnemanz, says to the young and innocent boy whom he is about to take to the Castle of the Holy Grail, "Du siehst, mein Sohn. Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit." That is: My son. Where we are going, Space becomes Time."

And so, a generation before Einstein published his theory that Time and Space are interchangeable, a German bass was singing these words on the stage of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in Germany. The imagination of a composer and the imagination of a scientist expressed the same counterintuitive, but, as Einstein wrote, "amusing and seductive," thought.

I mention this because we are taught now that artists are the imaginative, i.e. amusing but generally useless, ones and scientists are the rational saviors of society and give a country the edge to dominate world politics. However, no matter what categories we invoke, every scientist must be an artist, for surely they have to imagine solutions to what seems inscrutable. How we cure the many diseases we call cancer will come from people who figure it out. We walked on the moon by first of all understanding that the strangely changing white disc in the sky was not a hole, but was a round object. Then we spent centuries writing poems and songs about it and wanting to go there. That's when scientists figured out a lot of things about gravity, orbits, life support, and designed a space craft (note: the use of the word "design?"), space suits, lunar landing modules and made sure there was a television camera to broadcast the event, when we actually landed men on the moon on July 20, 1969. Technology was the handmaiden of the artistic dream: to walk on the moon.

Technology has but one function: to make the romantic dream happen. Once Einstein and Poincaré helped us to understand time and simultaneity, people wanted to communicate simultaneously with other people. Our current technological response to that romantic dream is the

Internet, the cell phone and Twitter. Again, technologies at the bidding of the creative idea, and together, they have once again changed the world.

My dad was a medical doctor in New York – what people used to call “a general practitioner.” His father, Baldassare, was a composer, violinist, conductor of hotel orchestras and a teacher. Every half hour during office hours, my dad had to diagnose a patient by looking and listening. He heard what their complaint was and had to imagine what was really being said, what it meant and what was the best way to treat this person. He used his training, his experience and his imagination.

He once told me that in forty years he never made an incorrect diagnosis. I believe him. He treated everything from constipation and acne and to high blood pressure and heart disease. He delivered babies. He saved my life once when I was five years old by feeling my forehead and putting his hand on the right side of my abdomen. He was as much of an artist as his father and as his son.

Every one of you out there is a walking-talking example of being an artist. Just look at you! Everyone is wearing something. Look around at the others in your life and see the choices that were made for this day. Clothes bought by, handed down, given as gifts, all selected to represent each of you and telling those of us who encounter you, who you are and who you want us to think you are.

Just focus on those sweaters, the shirts, the blouses, the shoes and the jewelry. Each represents a complex history: a history that reaches back thousands of years of hunting, farming, technology and love – because there’s probably something on you that someone gave to you. You – each and every one of you – are your own symphony this day and together we are a unique quilt of humanity.

And it is this humanity that is Art, because when the anthropologists and the biologists start calling us human beings, that’s when we got up off all fours, took out the garbage, respected our dead by burying them together and then we built a scaffold and painted gigantic pictures on cave walls. These images are thought to be 32,000 years old. We humans seem to have begun telling our stories, singing our stories and drawing them around the time we became humans. It appears to be one of the things that makes us actually human.

So the next time someone tells you that the Arts are unimportant, just look at what that person is wearing. Consider the job that person has and the creativity it takes to do that job: being a mother, delivering the mail, making potato chips. Now, think about what this room would look like without Art. Start erasing each element until you find us shivering, naked on the unmowed wild grass.

And, there’s another and very big point about the function of Art. Is there a “why?” in this story? The Arts in Western Society have always acted as our teachers. Yes, it is what each civilization leaves behind, whether that be The Great Wall, the Taj Mahal, the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, but Western art has always acted as society’s conscience and teacher. Sometimes the arts uplift us. Sometimes they show us the way. Sometimes they act as warnings. And we are not necessarily talking about High Art. This is true of our most popular arts.

All those popular Broadway musicals -- from the 1927 Show Boat through Finian's Rainbow of 1947, South Pacific of 1949, and West Side Story in 1957 -- led the way to racial integration by teaching a huge audience about the destructive and un-American power of racism. The Arts are always political in some way or other. The Greeks knew it, which is why they brought the populace together in amphitheaters to experience the catharsis of tragedy and purification. It is why Verdi wrote Aida and La Forza del Destino and why Picasso painted "Guernica."

The people who went to Broadway shows, or their Hollywood adaptations, were rooting for Julie LaVerne, a woman of mixed race thrown off a showboat and whose life is destroyed by miscegenation laws. The post-war audiences wept to see Lieutenant Joe Cable die before overcoming the racism that confronted his love for a young Polynesian woman in South Pacific. And watching the Puerto Rican-American Maria follow the impromptu cortege of Jets and Sharks carry the body of her Caucasian-American lover, Tony, is a final image that no one who has ever seen or performed in West Side Story will ever forget.

This is the fundamental power and function of Art in our society, and why it is one of America's greatest achievements -- one that is linked to the very philosophy that created the United States in the first place.

And that brings us to Part Two of this story: North Carolina and its unique school -- a school that trains kids in the arts.

North Carolina took the lead in America by creating the nation's very first public university. We did that during the first months of George Washington's presidency. The commitment to educate its citizens is a basic tenet of Our State. In 1949, it was North Carolina that took the lead by creating the country's very first arts council in Winston-Salem. And in 1963, the nation's first public arts conservatory was created by our General Assembly.

Today, the University of North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem remains unique in so many ways that it is difficult to find any peer institution in the world. It is small -- the smallest of the state's universities. How small? Well, both Eastern Carolina and UNC Asheville, the next two smallest universities, have three times the number of students each. It is the only university in the system that has a high school component. Some 300 high schoolers study at UNCSA. (And this year, we accepted fourteen very young-looking eighth graders!) These are the ballet dancers, the visual artists, the instrumentalists and the young actors.

The college has only about 700 students and we teach them music, dance, drama, filmmaking and design & production. And there are a hundred graduate students, studying to be opera singers, film composers, and designers of sets, costumes, wigs and makeup.

We represent only 1% of the UNC budget and account for 1/2% of its population. Yes, it costs more to teach by mentoring, which is the only way to teach a flutist, a cinematographer or an actor, but the cost to each citizen of North Carolina amounts to less than one cent a day. And unlike

most other fields of study, our kids are giving back from the moment they arrive on campus. Our kids give over 300 performances a year. They are to be found in the Brenner Children's Hospital. They are working with Winston-Salem's public school system and in its elder care facilities. We have a community music school, and dance prep program that, after a small initiation fee, is absolutely free.

Our students come from over 50 counties in this state, as well as 45 other states and over 20 countries. Fifty per cent of them are North Carolinians. Families actually move to North Carolina because their high school children, once accepted, can study there free of charge.

We have kids from Ghana, Serbia, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Cyprus, China, Taiwan, Russia and El Salvador. Think of the impact North Carolina has on these students and, indeed, on the world! Think for a moment, not only of those who stay in the state to live and raise their families – about 50% of them -- but think also of these children as the ambassadors of the wisdom and generosity of the people of North Carolina which nurtured them and then rejoices in the films, plays, dances, songs and designs they will make. Each of them returns a thousand-fold what we gave to them. You can take pride in that, whether you are watching "As the World Turns" on television, Up in the Air in the movie theaters, attending Billy Elliot on Broadway, going to Durham for Phantom of the Opera, Charlotte for South Pacific, or Jersey Boys, listening to Jim Lauderdale's Grammy-winning bluegrass music, or attending the New York Philharmonic.

And here's an amazing thing: Although it was a transformative idea in the first place, UNCOSA is run by great and committed artists who are continually making it better. It is now, because of its internal departments, the only school I know that takes an idea for a production and produces it without hiring outside labor. Our kids design it, build it, wear it, act it, sing it, film it, tear it down and clean it up.

And because we are small, I have the privilege of knowing most of them by first name. Imagine hearing of the freshman from Serbia named Milan, who just last month played the piccolo part in our Nutcracker. What has this boy seen growing up in that war-torn country and how did he come to Winston-Salem? Look at the smile on his face and the sadness in his eyes for the answer.

Think about the 15-year-old from Todd, Baron Fenwick III, winner of the Winston-Salem spelling bee competition when he was in eighth grade and the winner of the first Leonard Bernstein Achievement Award given this past spring. When he recently played Chopin's third ballade at the Governor's mansion in November, Hannah Gage, President of UNC's Board of Governors asked me, "What would have happened to him without UNCOSA?" Indeed. We know what would have happened. But now think of what is happening to him now and how he will spend his life returning your generosity to thousands of people for the rest of his life.

And think of Kendall Ramseur, a young 'cellist from Charlotte, and Michelle Storey, from Emerald Isle, whom I brought to play in the orchestra at the 50th Anniversary of the Grammys two years ago, when I conducted the Rhapsody in Blue with Herbie Hancock and Lang Lang, before an audience of one hundred million. The contractor for that event in Hollywood, who also contracts the Academy Awards and Dancing with the Stars, told them that if they should come to Los Angeles, he would hire them.

And think about Jacobi Howard, a junior in the School of Drama. He grew up in Charlotte's inner city and auditioned for us when he was 23 years old and working as a janitor at the Jackson Youth Academy. His mother, a middle school teacher, encouraged him to audition for UNCSCA and he overwhelmed the faculty with his raw talent.

After an incredibly challenging two years of training at UNCSCA, Jacobi triumphantly played the lead in our recent production of August Wilson's *Fences* – one of the most challenging roles for an African American actor, one that was first performed by the unknown James Earl Jones. Jacobi will be a very famous and successful actor. What might have happened to him without our school?

Think about this for a moment: A young person of talent has the opportunity to get a high school, college or post-graduate degree in actually **DOING** something! On the one hand we are a center of excellence, like a medical or law school, training kids with a faculty of professionals. On the other hand, we are a vocational institute, that teaches kids skills from which they will earn a living. The majority of our Design & Production kids have jobs **BEFORE** they graduate. The other day, I had lunch with Lauren Bairas, a senior, who has just been hired by Cirque de Soleil and is moving to Las Vegas – and she did not even apply. Ryan Wineiger, who graduated last May, designed a triumphant production of *Beauty and the Beast* for the Children's Theater of Charlotte, and has already been asked back. He is currently working at Washington's Kennedy Center.

North Carolina has a \$41 billion creative industry. Last year, our dean of filmmaking was a principal force in getting a bill passed that brings North Carolina's tax rebate for films up to 25%, so this state can restore its former position as a leader within the feature film industry.

Our country has, without question, become the artistic leader of the world. That is because we have always embraced influences from outside and made it our own. We have the greatest conservatories in the world and we achieve the greatest artists. In one of the worst years in the world economy, we saw Hollywood break the \$10 billion mark, with one film, *Avatar*, earning over \$1 billion in its first sixteen days – and it is just opened in China breaking all records for an opening day of a film in that country, bringing in more than 33 million yuan.

Here's why I mention China. A year ago an American movie opened in China called *Kung Fu Panda* which has since grossed more than \$631 million worldwide, and, according to Jeffrey Katzenberg, will become a franchise of 5 or 6 sequels. Remember, every moment in a film involves hundreds of creative people: writers, designers, actors, cinematographers, editors, musicians, not to mention janitors, chefs, secretaries, interns, and accountants – a virtual city of workers spanning every aspect of what we call "a job." The next time you watch a movie, stay for the end credits and say the phrase "economic stimulus package."

Why I singled out *Kung Fu Panda* as an example is that the Chinese intellectual community continues to be in deep discussion about this film. At first there was a call to boycott it in China, because it was felt that the Americans had absconded with one of China's most precious trademarks – the panda – and were now making money from it -- a lot of money.

The boycott, however, never happened, and the film has broken all box office tabulations in China. The point of bringing up this particular film is that while we in North Carolina have watched

our furniture industry go to China, China is wondering why they can't make a blockbuster movie about their own culture. And the answer brings us back to American freedom and creativity -- that spark which has kept our country at the forefront of the arts and entertainment industry for almost a century now.

And finally, let me invite you to visit our campus and experience the passion and the talent of our students. Look into their eyes. You will not find a single bored teenager. You will find the future of our country. You will see a group of young people who will try to make our world a better place. And we all thank the people of North Carolina for making UNCSEA possible.

John Mauceri

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