

The bothersome priest

Tuesday, May 12, 2009

Last Friday I retired from politics. My five-day career had consisted for the most part of conversations held with members of the Centre Stage board of directors in an effort to ease resistance to the executive director's chosen path to retirement. Unfortunately, by the end of the week, that path had been abandoned for a series of rabbit holes where I became quickly disoriented and might have done more harm than good.

To explain ...

BJ Koonce, the executive director of Centre Stage and one of my closest friends, decided some time ago that she would retire in August at the end of the current season. She'd begun to test the waters of succession, discussing aspects of her vision with various individuals, and hoped by the end of the season to have an eminently qualified successor in place with whom she and I would work together as a contract marketing team.

We'd evolved and begun to implement a marketing plan for the upcoming season in which she'd serve as spokesmodel, consistent in approach with the two prior seasons in which a character from one of the season's shows is paired with a short slogan. The real beauty of this campaign, however, was the way in which it conveyed to the Greenville arts community that BJ Koonce was still a part of Centre Stage. Post-transition, it would serve the public relations purpose of reassuring anybody who cares that the new guard had the old guard's blessing and that the old guard was pleased to headline one of the shows in the new guard's season.

Then the board got involved.

After BJ informed the board president of her intentions, the board put BJ under what I consider to be house arrest. Her networking activities were interpreted as an attempt to "choose her own successor," (a procedural impossibility, by the way) rather than as the laying of necessary diplomatic groundwork for a search committee. Her face on the next season's marketing material was cited as a cause for "concern." She was told by the board that all grant proposals and marketing materials were to be submitted to the board prior to publication. And when the vice president of the board directed her to suspend all pending promotional projects, that directive jettisoned weeks of creative and administrative work already invested in a video project scheduled to tape last Friday. The value of the studio time to be donated in producing that 10-minute promo for the 2009-2010 season was between ten and fifteen thousand dollars. In effect, the board had become an untrained and over-zealous oversight committee in absentia and BJ's working conditions had become untenable.

For those unfamiliar with her, BJ is a beloved and long-standing fixture of the Greenville arts and business communities. A founder and past president of The Warehouse Theatre board of directors, a member of the board of directors of the Metropolitan Arts Council, chair of the Cultural Coalition, a member of the Board of Regents of the Leadership Greenville Alumni Association ... and on and on.

Continued ...



BJ Koonce in a promotional photo shot by David Crosby. Concept, art direction and layout by the author. This shot was taken in tandem with the 2009-2010 promotional shots the world may never see.



During her 4-year tenure as executive director of Centre Stage, she has doubled the theater's membership, tripled its staff and quadrupled its operating budget. Her credentials and job performance speak for themselves. The board's recent actions try to speak for themselves, too, but so far have managed only to bray and belch and break wind.

At this point in the narrative, it's easy to become disoriented. Events speed up, slow down, overlap, merge, divide and distort. I engaged on behalf of someone I respect and admire and often have wished were as adept at confrontation as she is at cajoling. I took it upon myself to do for her the dirty work I knew she'd never do for herself, to "speak truth to authority," as I put it ... to speak plainly. But like those poor rubes who took Henry II at his word when he wondered aloud if no one would "rid him of this bothersome priest," I misjudged BJ's conviction. Mea culpa. Mia maxima culpa.

Today, after a weekend spent in retreat at Peter Saputo's mountain cabin, I'm reflecting with lower blood pressure on the week that was. In addition to having to replace my laptop, mouse, cell phone, camera and related accoutrement (for reasons unrelated to Centre Stage), I lobbied unsuccessfully for a bill that had not been written and I concluded the better part of two weeks preparing for a project that, more likely than not, will never see the light of day.

So have I learned anything? Not that I'm aware of. Do I have regrets? Not that I'm aware of. Did I give anybody the impression that I'm a hotheaded nut? Probably. Am I tired and do I look forward to less interesting times ahead? Dear God, yes.

Length: 7:02

Music: *The Times They Are A-Changin* by Bob Dylan, *Grand Canyon Suite* by Aaron Copeland

Writer, voice: Tim Brosnan