

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 27 – Tom Gabbard – Show Business

Producing What is Best in Ourselves

And now a personal word,

Beauty. War. Religion. Love. Loss. Life. Death. Redemption. The human condition, in all its wonder and depravity, is at the heart of the arts and humanities. It is also at the heart of what Tom Gabbard presents to the city of Charlotte every day and night. Blumenthal Performing Arts is where we confront who we are, where we gather to be amazed, where we are challenged, and where we are renewed by the light of the human spirit.

The Blumenthal presents the best in the performing arts, so it claims, and it's hard to argue that it does not. Across its six stages – the Belk Theater, Booth Playhouse, and Stage Door Theater at Blumenthal Performing Arts Center; McGlohon Theater and Duke Energy Theater at Spirit Square, and Knight Theater at the Levine Center for the Arts – the Blumenthal offers unmatched entertainment from Broadway blockbusters to concerts, spoken word, dance, symphony, drama and comedy. Tom is an impresario, financing, organizing and delivering a dizzying array of shows.

The meaning of the work goes beyond the satisfaction of audiences. The Blumenthal has transformed the physical street and is about the mission of changing lives. It is elevating citizenship and civic discourse and providing paths of social mobility. It is a driver of the regional economy as it builds social capital and community.

Are there unintended consequences to all this success?

There may be. Tom mentioned that the Blumenthal's dominance of the art scene in Charlotte is far greater than in peer cities. Charlotte benefits from the hundreds of polished and uplifting productions on several stages, but these performances are all under the Blumenthal's banner. The Blumenthal determines what is on stage, when it is on stage, and what stage it is on. It essentially controls the calendar of the premium cultural offerings in the city.

What is the effect of that dominance? One effect is that the taste and programming of the Blumenthal largely defines art performance in Charlotte. Another effect may be that the Blumenthal squeezes out a healthy eco-system of competing, homegrown offerings that are not on Blumenthal stages.

This last point is arguable and controversial. This is what I do know.

The Blumenthal enriches the lives of thousands of artists and hundreds of thousands of citizens with its exploration of the arts and what it means to be human.

I also know that the Blumenthal has been incredibly generous supporting the efforts of independent grassroots artists in the city, from open mic night to extending their stages to diverse resident companies to writing checks sponsoring new ideas and artistic expression. The Blumenthal sponsored Charlotte Viewpoint, the civic and cultural non-profit magazine that I founded and edited for nearly 10 years, and it is the lead sponsor of this podcast.

One month into the production of On Life and Meaning I asked Tom if he would support our efforts. Not only did he say yes, he offered an array of support beyond a check. He lent the credibility and brand of the Blumenthal to our effort. And I'm incredibly grateful for it.

All of which suggests that the Blumenthal knows it is in its self-interest to support an eco-system of artists and art consumers, whether those artists are on Blumenthal stages or not.

A great city has many champions. Many go unsung. Tom Gabbard is a champion of the arts and humanities, producing what is best in ourselves.

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