

Merging the Spheres

By

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Universities have a strange relationship with the arts, just as our society does in so many ways. Many universities choose not to have a program or school of the arts, yet these same institutions would think it unimaginable not to have departments of history, literature, or physics. Even those universities that do have art schools often keep the performing and visual arts at the margins. A faculty workshop in a professional school might very well include professors of political science or philosophy but not a professor of theatre or the visual arts. There is nothing hostile or antagonistic in this reality, but rather just an implicit assumption of too large a gap in intellectual interests to be overcome.

The truth is that the arts in America are far from being fully integrated into our lives. They exist in a realm unto themselves, to be visited but not brought home. The reasons for this are complex and mutual—a favoring of the pragmatic, the analytical, and the expository and a concomitant natural skepticism of the intuitive, the suggestive, and the nonrational; a concern about developing and applying standards of excellence to the arts when the possibilities for deception through obscurantism are considerable; and even at times a kind of isolationist mentality within the arts themselves. Whether trivialized or deified, the arts stand always in a precarious position to the broader society—academic or national. They tend to be the first to be cut when resources are tight, which in itself speaks volumes about where you stand in relation to the whole. The way we approach the arts is nicely reflected in the division of our labors by the press in an “Arts and Leisure” section (Would anyone ever consider a “Politics and Leisure” section?).

At Columbia we are extremely fortunate to have an exceptionally fine School of the Arts, reasonably well integrated into the University, with a truly outstanding dean—Bruce W. Ferguson—who is capable of surmounting whatever barriers the rest

of the world throws up. Oddly, the school's reputation lags behind its accomplishments—hence the value and importance of this issue of *Columbia*. But, as accomplished as it is, there is also huge potential here for Columbia and for New York City and beyond. The collaborative project on *Midnight's Children* between the Royal Shakespeare Company, Salman Rushdie, the Apollo Theater, and Columbia is representative of what is possible, and a portent of things to come. The integration of academic fields along with artistic performance, creating a unique intellectual and cultural experience; the partnership of the academy and a leading cultural institution, on an artistic venture that would not have been possible even in the nonprofit world of theatre; and the involvement of the community and the public with all that occurred—all this together is at least a step in the direction of merging the various spheres of human activity that share the common purpose of uncovering just a bit more of life's mysteries.

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