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**"The Big Lebowski":** Starts Friday, Clinton Street Theater

**"A Connecticut Yankee":** Opens 8 p.m. Friday, Jaqua Concert Hall, the Shedd

#### Columbia Gorge

##### Bluegrass Festival:

Friday-Sunday, Skamania County Fairgrounds

**Playback Theater:** 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Theater! Theatre!

##### Noisettes:

9 p.m. Monday, Berbat's Pan **"I Am My Own Wife":**

7:30 p.m. Monday-Wednesday, CoHo Theater **"Bumps":** 9 p.m.

Thursday at Clinton Street Theater

##### "Evita":

Opens 7:30 Thursday, through Aug. 16, Broadway Rose Theater

## Analysis: Memorial Coliseum as a crucible for creative class

by D.K. Row, *The Oregonian*

Saturday May 30, 2009, 10:00 AM



The episode to save this modernist classic served as a crucible for many frustrated creatives

The recent tumultuous episode saving Memorial Coliseum from the wrecking ball has crystallized a long-brewing frustration within Portland's arts community.

Despite plenteous activity in every creative sector, there's precious little leadership to empower dialogue and agendas. It's an especially bitter realization after more than a decade of go-go ambition for what many regard as a prototype city for the so-called creative class. And the sourness has even led some to conclude that the perception of Portland as charming, rain-dappled fertile ground for creatives is a myth.

Challenging ideas, they say, are ultimately not taken seriously by the city's ruling trinity of City Hall, developers and other power brokers. Instead, marketing buzzwords, empty statistics and media hype prevail, cementing an idyllic Portland in the public imagination.

Still, the leadership vacuum has provided some members of Portland's diverse creative community with a clarity of purpose during this critical period of post-recession survival and political turmoil. As they measure the future, including a long march toward creating support for a ballot measure that would provide \$15 million to \$20 million annually for the arts and culture, some activists are determined to be less passive and more forceful, just like their financially brawnier counterparts across the aisle.

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"We've just said, 'Enough,'" says Stuart Emmons, a respected urban activist/architect and one of the more impassioned voices to save the coliseum. "We need to speak out for what we believe in and quit allowing politics to keep us from what's right. This goes way beyond Memorial Coliseum."

### Politics, not process

But for too long politics and a lack of authoritative leadership have prevented Portland from becoming the process-devoted paradise it's painted as in the East Coast media -- the city that burnishes buildings, coffee beans and ideas about sustainability and design into artisanal gems.

For instance: Portland has witnessed landscape-changing development the past 20 years. Projects have been designed and built at a pace brisker than steeping Lipton Tea during Portland's Gilded Age.

Yet only one major project in recent times has achieved international stature: Brad Cloepfil's design of the Wieden+Kennedy building in the Pearl District.

Why not a more commanding legacy? Too often, architects and designers say, the most innovative ideas and a bona-fide public process have been surrendered to the more muscular private interests of developers, understandably driven by cost-saving concerns and a desire not to offend public sensibilities.

The result has been some missed opportunities to produce something visionary -- Gerding Theater at the Armory, Jamison Square park and South Waterfront -- and a surfeit of enclaves featuring uniform condos and other service-oriented retail projects.

The Gerding Theater, for example, was hatched as a multiuse space because many believed the public wouldn't solely fund a major landmark theater. Indeed, the Gerding ended up a community gathering hub, public art space and, of course, home to Portland's major stage company -- but not a piece of major league architecture.

"Our process can be contrived and misdirected," says Rick Potestio, a self-employed architect who also fought to save the coliseum. "It seems the major landowners and developers drive most of the process by the time we, the public, get to it. It's a reactive system, not a proactive one."

### Looking for leaders

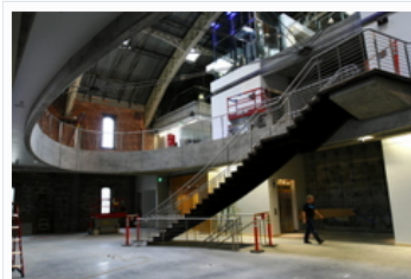
Who knows if a charismatic, sharp-tongued and visionary advocate would have been able to convince the public that great buildings, brilliant urban plans and heady artworks aren't dreamy impracticalities -- but worth cherishing and building upon. The city hasn't remotely approached producing such a leader since William Jamison, the late art dealer and cultural advocate, and Kristy Edmunds, founder of the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art.

That's why people have often looked to City Hall for leadership.

And that's why Mayor Sam Adams seemed such an attractive champion for Portland's creative community.

Before he became the mayor, Adams was a city commissioner whose portfolio included the arts and culture community. Adams' campaign ingeniously targeted Portland's surging class of financially challenged but forward-thinking creatives, and he showed up with spry energy at numerous art, design, architecture and other related events.

But Adams went beyond the usual public appearances and voicing



The Gerding Theater is a little too busy -- a reflection of the many interests it serves.

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predictable appeals for more funding. He also invoked ideas of public inclusiveness, pledging that the most challenging creative ideas should become the central points of civic discourse. The ruling class wouldn't always triumph under his watch.

In other words, Adams spoke the creative community's language and understood its existential yearnings -- and that's one reason why most supported him overwhelmingly during his bids for both commissioner and mayor.

### **Changing dynamic**

But after a sex scandal broke just weeks after Adams became mayor, former supporters began to whisper about a recall, including even a few cultural leaders who attended a public rally for him after the news came out.

Adams moved quickly -- maybe hastily -- on projects. He and Vancouver's mayor rapidly came to terms on a design for the hotly contested Columbia River Crossing. Then he fell in step with the move to replace the coliseum with a major league soccer field.

In regards to the coliseum, the mayor underestimated the forces opposing such a plan. Like the media, he also misinterpreted the social and historic resonance that building had with the arts community, particularly the city's influential army of designers, architects and planners.

The activists trying to save the Modernist coliseum designed by Skidmore Owings & Merrill said they weren't doing so because they believed it's an architectural masterpiece or even one of the legendary firm's finest projects.

Rather, call it nostalgia by those who think the last satisfying public process happened roughly a quarter century ago -- the birth of Pioneer Courthouse Square. The lean, rigorous design that opened in 1960 during the beginning of Kennedy-era idealism represents a practical economy and heartening public vetting that seem out of reach now -- the Portland Way before it became part of the national pop-culture consciousness decades later.

To these activists, the coliseum represents a lineage about how to build and make things well, enduring core values that speak directly to how Oregonians have always treated and preserved what's important to them.

And one thing they expected from the arts and culture mayor -- its leader -- was to fight to preserve such values.

### **Stunning turnabout**

The mayor said as much at a town hall meeting April 14 at the Gerding Theater, where he and various arts directors, politicians and community activists gathered for the rollout of the most ambitious plan to affect the arts community in a long time: a possible ballot measure that would provide \$15 million to \$20 million in funding for the arts annually.

It's an imposing, maybe impossible, proposal that will likely take years of advocacy, planning and polling. Above all, it will require the kind of community galvanizing that's never happened in the Portland arts community, the kind of incitement that demands leadership -- from Adams and City Hall and anyone else willing to emerge.

But the day after the rollout, the mayor astonished the community with his proposal for the coliseum during another public gathering at North Portland's Leftbank Building.

"It was surreal," says designer Randy Higgins, another vocal figure in the fight to save the coliseum. "What day is he? On Monday he said creative communities were essential to the city. Then, on Tuesday, he engaged in a process that involved no process at all. One day discredited the other."

But another stunning transformation occurred that evening at the Leftbank: It happened to the design and architecture community, and by extension, the city's entire universe of creatives. Looking back at the city's long, winding history with public processes, people began to believe that Portland doesn't sincerely listen to formidable, uneasy ideas. It just entertains them. And this had to change.

"A lot of us had been timid about speaking up for a lot of years," Emmons says. "But Tuesday night at the Leftbank was a watershed moment."

### Looking for leaders

Only time will tell if the evening at the Leftbank will be regarded as a historic moment. But it pulled back the curtains, so to speak, on the community stage, revealing a tale in search of a major character: leadership.

"Is there leadership in the arts and culture community?" says Thomas Lauderdale, the iconic musician and Adams confidant who opposed the mayor publicly to save the coliseum. "There are a lot of collaborators and consensus builders in the community, but there isn't a single arts guru or person that everyone can look up to."



Until the recent scandal, Sam Adams was seen by many as the leader of the arts community.

Leadership will be critical in the months and years to come because the community can't afford another period of whistle-in-the-dark forecasting.

Sure, the past decade's influx of artists, designers, architects, planners and others have made the community central to the city's personality. It even seemed, for a moment, that spunky, idiosyncratic Portland would step up into the role of major cultural city, not just an unusual one that's the darling of the national media.

But the recession has severely damaged funding for most nonprofits. Major galleries have gone out of business. Unemployment for Portland-area design professionals is at least 25 percent, and that's not accounting for salary reductions many employed professionals already have endured. And so far, the most powerful arts figures have offered little in the way of creative solutions and soothing tonics.

Perhaps someone will step onto the main stage as the community pushes the arts and culture ballot initiative.

The dirty trench work for such a possible measure has started, as familiar arts figures and nonprofits jockey politically and form necessary alliances. But in order to succeed, the proposal process needs to transcend politics and politicians: It needs a humanistic communicator, someone who can articulate plainly and eloquently why the whole city would benefit from increased cultural investment. Such a prescient leader will be particularly crucial because of Portland's notoriously stingy arts funding history: Even the most rational appeals might not move a public drowning in a recession.

The arts community may sense that futility. Who knows how well it will follow through -- if it will emulate President Barack Obama and try to start its own campaign for change. But it's been stirred and agitated to a hotter boil, largely because of the fight to save the coliseum.

"This episode woke people up," says arts consultant George Thorn. "Everyone realizes more firmly now that they alone are their own advocates."

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