

Marketing an arts mecca

Awards shows raise D.C.'s profile

By Kelly Jane Torrance
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It was one of the cultural events of the year. Literary lion Philip Roth received this year's PEN/Faulkner Award For Fiction for his novel "Everyman" last month. Joining him on the stage were three of the finalists, some of the country's best short story writers. Intellectual celebrities, such as actor and playwright Wallace Shawn, dotted the mingling crowd.

This celebration of serious fiction didn't take place in New York, the country's publishing capital, however — it was right here in the District.

It wasn't even the only event last month that brought the cultural cognoscenti to Washington. Paul Simon received the first annual Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song. Performers at the star-studded gala at the Warner Theatre included Stevie Wonder and Philip Glass.

When you think of an arts and culture destination, you probably think New York or Los Angeles. "D.C. is known really for its political and news media celebrities more than anything else," notes Library of Congress director of communications Matt

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Raymond.

That's starting to change. AmericanStyle magazine just named Washington the fourth-best arts destination among big cities — ahead of, among others, Los Angeles.

Washington's long-estab-

lished institutions — public and private — are exploiting their vast resources, bringing culture out of dark museums and libraries and into the public eye. Big events, like star-studded award ceremonies and themed festivals, are savvy promotional "gimmicks" drawing attention to D.C.'s increasing status as a cultural capital.

The PEN/Faulkner Award is 27 years old, and as respected as any honor handed out in New York.

"I think it's the best of the prizes," says Mr. Roth, citing the high standards and eminent judges. "Writers read from their work, rather than thank their psychiatrists. . . . I find it refreshing that it's not in New York."

The PEN/Faulkner Foundation was founded in Charlottesville, but moved to the capital after an invitation by the late Folger Shakespeare Library director O.B. Hardison, Jr., whose work transformed both organizations.

PEN/Faulkner, located at the Folger, also has an annual reading series, which is becoming more diversified, says executive director Jessica Neely. The 2007-08 series includes not just literary heavyweights like local authors Alice McDermott and Edward P. Jones (a PEN/Faulkner finalist), but a panel on graphic novels and a night with "Three Kings" — Stephen and his author-wife and -son.

Perhaps the country's most prestigious annual cultural event is held here every year — the Kennedy Center Honors. "It's the only time you see classical music on prime time network television, ever," notes Kennedy Center President Michael Kaiser of the televised December

event. Last year's gala brought to town honorees Andrew Lloyd-Webber, Smokey Robinson, Steven Spielberg, Dolly Parton and Zubin Mehta — along with the usual influx of celebrity presenters and past winners.

The Kennedy Center's 10-year-old Mark Twain Prize for American Humor — awards have gone to Richard Pryor, Steve Martin and this year's honoree Billy Crystal, among others — has become another annual, nationally televised fixture on the nation's cultural landscape. A humor prize in stodgy Washington? It might seem incongruous, until you consider that Washington has long been home to political satirists descended in spirit from Twain like P.J. O'Rourke and Christopher Buckley.

Mr. Kaiser says the District has plenty to be proud of. "We're the choral capital of the country," he boasts. And the city is quickly becoming a theater center, with an "astonishing" 60 professional groups.

Mr. Kaiser himself is partly responsible for attracting national attention to the District's emergence as a theater capital. He's organized two theater festivals — one celebrating Stephen Sondheim, the other Tennessee Williams — with a third on August Wilson next year. The secret to



success, Mr. Kaiser says, is focusing both on the quality of the work and the way it's marketed, both in and outside the city.

His latest project is his — and the District's — most ambitious yet. The Shakespeare in Washington Festival involves just about every cultural institution in the metropolitan area.

"I believe you get visibility from a larger project," Mr. Kaiser says. Such a thing doesn't exist in other cities, and Mr. Kaiser suspects it could never have happened in New York — groups there are too competitive.

Deborah Ziska agrees that District arts groups are remarkably collegial. "I think 9/11 shocked everybody into taking another look into how we promote the city and how we promote ourselves with the city," says the National Gallery of Art chief spokeswoman. Since then, she says, "there has been an incredible level of collaboration between all the cultural entities at various levels."

Besides its museum holdings, the National Gallery holds the prestigious A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts each year. The lecturers are world-

renowned. Two classic studies — E.H. Gombrich's "Art and Illusion" and Kenneth Clark's "The Nude" — are the published versions of their author's talks in the series.

There's more. Many people don't know that Washington — not Cambridge (Massachusetts or England), not Stratford-upon-Avon — has the world's largest collection of Shakespeare materials, as well as other important collections of Renaissance works. They're housed at the Folger.

"You come to the Folger for an evening of theater or an evening of music but you can come before the performance or take a moment during the intermission to see what's on exhibition," Folger director Gail Kern Paster says.

When it produced David Garrick's 1766 play "The Clandestine Marriage," audiences could see the manuscript in the playwright's own hand.

"We're a museum experience, library experience, and performing arts experience, all in one," says Ms. Paster.

The Folger isn't the only one. Newbies might think the Library of Congress is nothing more than a collection of books and a reading room in which to peruse them. But the library has poetry readings, lectures and film screenings every day.

"We had 134 million items at

last count. Only 32 million of those are books or what we call other printed materials," Mr. Raymond points out, citing sound recordings and photographs, among others.

Through the copyright law, the library has long been the ultimate archive of the country's musical culture. "Frankly, the Gershwin Prize is an opportunity for the library to talk about the vast repository of musical creativity that's housed here," Mr. Raymond says.

The award is named after songwriters George and Ira Gershwin, whose papers are in the library. "You can see the original 'Porgy and Bess' and see the news clippings which at the time panned 'Porgy and Bess,'" he laughs.

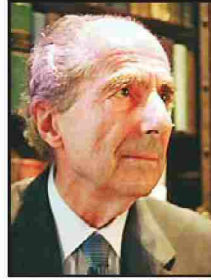
Mr. Kaiser says a transformation in D.C. culture couldn't have happened without a transformation in the people who live here.

"I think the transient nature of Washington for many years made it less of an imperative to communicate to the outside world the potency of the arts organizations," he muses. "Now we're building a larger and, more important, dedicated group of citizens who stay here, live here, and care about making their arts organizations grow."



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Paul Simon (above left), Stevie Wonder (at keyboard) and the Dixie Hummingbirds laugh as they perform together during the concert in tribute of Mr. Simon, who received the Library of Congress' Gershwin Prize for Popular Song at the Warner Theatre last month. Left: Author Philip Roth received the 2007 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction for "Everyman."

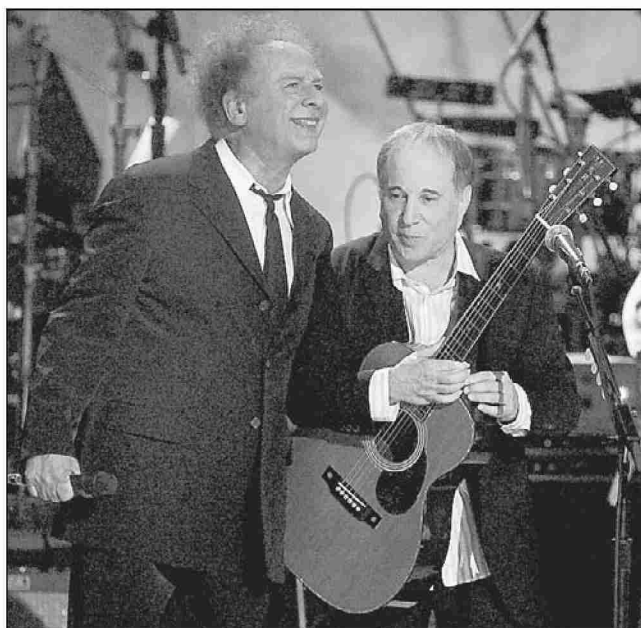


Bert V. Goulait
The Washington Times



James F. Brantley/The Washington Times

The Kennedy Center Honors ceremony is perhaps the nation's most prestigious cultural event. Last year's honorees were Zubin Mehta (left, seated), Steven Spielberg (second from left), Dolly Parton (center), Smokey Robinson (second from right) and Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber (right, seated). Paul Simon with guitar, shown with longtime partner Art Garfunkel (below left), received the first Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song. Young visitors to the Folger Shakespeare Library view a first folio of Shakespeare's works (below right).



Katie Falkenberg/The Washington Times



Barbara L. Salisbury/The Washington Times