

## Press Telegram (Long Beach, CA)

### A WORLD OF HOPE AND VISION

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He's back. The hair has softened from a sharper spike to dandelion fuzz, the African dashiki traded for a sports shirt, the amazed laugh has become sweeter--and a little sadder.

Peter Sellars, the 35-year-old artistic director of the Los Angeles Festival and Whiz Kid of Culture, is growing up. As he gazes out of an eighth floor window from the festival's new digs in a high-rise on Wilshire Boulevard, he spots invisible trouble.

"There is so much unprocessed frustration and rage in L.A. now," he declares. "Everyone is on edge. There are For Sale signs everywhere. Everyone is moving out. But if you take international relations even remotely seriously, you know that if it can't work in L.A. it can't work anywhere. There is nowhere else to go. This is it."

Sellars and his staff of 15, plus an advisory group of 30 youths, are putting the final feverish touches on this summer's scaled-down \$4 million multimedia event of African, African-American and Middle Eastern cultures.

On the eve of the 1990 Los Angeles Festival, Sellars beamed out from under a banner, "The World is Coming to Town," and spoke exuberantly, rapturously even, of Los Angeles, a city where 85 languages are spoken in the public schools and more people from different cultures live together in relative harmony than at any other time or place in the history of the planet.

He was the new kid on the block, a kinetic elf who showed up with a rich file of credentials including a 1983 MacArthur Foundation fellowship. He says he was dazzled by the challenge of playing a pivotal role in creating the metropolis of the future, a place where cultural differences are viewed as interesting, not threatening - a city where diversity is respected and nurtured.

Peter Sellars still talks about things like "finding a moment of beauty, a moment of honesty." He also says: "The threat of fascism is prevalent here and throughout the world. There is one cure: social justice. The arts constantly give people a taste of justice. The arts are about having a discussion where nobody has to get shot."

The first Los Angeles Festival in 1987, an offshoot of the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival, focused on European art. Sellars, who also serves as an adviser to the Los Angeles Philharmonic and works on stage, opera and film projects all over the world, was hired to direct the 1990 festival. He concentrated on the cultures of the Pacific Rim. Yet exotic groups like the Cambodian Classical Dance Troupe and the aborigine dancers of the Woomera Mornington Island Culture Team had barely recovered from jet lag when critics began to wonder if the festival hadn't become a kind of circus for the privileged.

This year, practically no one involved in the festival will have to go through customs. Shrinking budgets eliminated most foreign participation. Still, Sellars promises that the festival will maintain its international feel.

"Three hundred fifty curators are involved in this festival," he says. "Eighty percent of the events are free. This festival is a result of hundreds of people with brilliant ideas. The last festival concentrated more on dance. This focuses more on poetry and film and music. There are a lot of vitamins. It's not dessert-heavy. Yes, it is more serious this year. These are more serious times.

"And it will be beautiful. And it will be fun. And there will be sheer pleasure."

Ever a man of good spirits and generous laughter, Sellars admits he does get acutely discouraged about the direction of society.

"Every day I am abominable," he volunteers, chuckling. "There is a difference between being optimistic - which can mean dopey and pollyannaish - and hope. Hope is something that is earned painfully. You have to earn the right to hope by going through the worst."

“Our choices have been absolutely crazed. Our failures are so great, things can't be worse. We do not have money for an elaborate prison system and a cop on every corner. So let's try something else. Let's try anything. What we've got isn't working.”

Experiencing art is one way to develop new thinking, he says. It is the artists who have always helped society adapt to change: “They create a living, pulsating lifeblood. If we don't have artists, we end up with arteriosclerosis. Art is about keeping the blood moving through the system. We are in motion. That's what makes us different from rocks. We can't stand still, and we certainly can't go back.”

In recent months, Sellars directed an opera in Frankfurt, flew back to Los Angeles to raise money and spread the festival word, then flew off to Amsterdam to direct another opera.

Even though his life is filled with cultural riches, he says one of the most profoundly moving theatrical experiences he's had recently was a performance of “Macbeth” by 10-, 11- and 12-year-olds at Hobart Elementary School in Los Angeles.

“Here is a 10-year-old boy with blood all over his face at the lunch table playing Banquo's Ghost. There was incredible depth of reactions. It was shattering. It allowed the kids to work through death, to understand it, to process it so they didn't have to become it. They could get off the stage and leave it behind.

“In my line of work, culture is about creating a surrounding of beauty and honesty that lets people function,” he adds. “All issues seem abstract unless there is a human face. Art can take you through the experience of someone dying, but no one has to die. It is the opportunity of surviving death and learning from it and memorializing those who are gone. In a place where 600 children have been shot since January, it is a service, a real service, to deal with death.”

Like his theatrical experience at Hobart Elementary, Sellars is convinced the 1993 festival will bridge gaps between ethnic groups and inspire dialogue that can help - and perhaps save - Los Angeles. Throughout the globe, artists are freedom fighters, Sellars says.

“If we mean ‘America the Free,’ we have to fight for it. Ensuring space for controversy and dissent is protecting democracy. That's patriotism.”

Examples of patriotism in the 1993 Los Angeles Festival abound, he says. “Sweet Honey in the Rock,” a women's choir, will sing of hope and love and the potential for social change. “They keep alive the flame of nonviolence. They provide consolation in the midst of tragedy. They enable people to keep going.”

California's survival depends on more cultural exchange and less talk about low-level manufacturing jobs, Sellars says: “There is only one alternative to the violence. We have to give people ways to express themselves and be someone. The transformation of a nobody to a somebody is the deal. The big deal. That is all we are here for.

“We have to be asking: How do you feed people's aspirations? How do you create a context where people can achieve?”

Sellars would like to continue, but there is another pressing question to be raised: When does his ride leave for Malibu? Soon it will be time to take off for tonight's \$1,000-a-plate festival shindig at the J. Paul Getty Museum, and he still doesn't drive.

As he excuses himself to leave, his expression is playful. He approaches the fund-raiser with a quality strongly resembling joy. It's not that hustling for the big bucks is his favorite activity. But why not anticipate fun? Why not be open to the possibility of a moment of beauty?

“We will be fund-raising until opening night,” he confides with an ebullient laugh. “And during intermission.”

Peter Sellars is back.

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