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Convergence x

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Author: BILL VAN SICLEN Journal-Bulletin Arts Writer

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Imagine a young, tuxedo-clad Sean Connery leaning across a smoky baccarat table and suavely intoning the famous line: "The name is Bond, James Bond."

Now imagine an affable, baseball-capped city employee named Bob Rizzo leaning across a plate of fried calamari at Providence's Trinity Brewhouse and saying: "It was ripe, very ripe."

Rizzo isn't referring to the food, which is most excellent. Instead, he's describing an outdoor sculpture project that was done several years ago for the city's popular Convergence International Arts Festival.

The festival, which features 10 days of dance, theater and music performances, as well as outdoor displays of contemporary sculpture and installation art, starts Thursday with an opening-night party at the Cranston Street Armory. (For a listing of major events and activities, see the story on Page 9.)

The sculpture in question called for a floating pyramid of quahog shells to be built in the middle of Polo Lake in Roger Williams Park.

It was meant as a tribute to local Native American tribes such as the Wampanoags and Narragansetts, who traditionally used carved shells for bartering and ceremonial purposes. But for Rizzo and the rest of Convergence's installation crew, it nearly became an olfactory nightmare.

"The artist ordered something like four or five cubic yards of quahog shells from a local seafood supplier," Rizzo says with a laugh. "That's about 2,000 shells.

"Unfortunately, when the shells arrived they were - how shall I put this - a little on the green side. We had to send them back and order up another batch that had spent a little more time curing."

Rizzo, who heads the Providence Park Department's Division of Public Programming, has plenty of war stories to tell about putting on the state's largest showcase of

contemporary art, dance, theater and music. And why not? He's been in charge of the festival since its debut in 1987.

Yet as the city-sponsored event has grown over the past 10 years, the sweet smell of success has far outweighed the occasional outbreak of eau de shellfish. The number of artists and performers, for example, has jumped from 20 for Convergence I to more than 100 for Convergence X. The festival's budget has also expanded, from less than \$10,000 in 1987 to more than \$80,000 this year.

In the process, the festival has outgrown its original home in Roger Williams Park.

Beginning last year, about half the sculpture installations and most of the music and theater performances were moved to downtown Providence, with the heaviest concentration in Waterplace Park and along the city's new riverwalk system. It's a trend Rizzo says will continue.

"Bringing the festival into downtown makes a lot of sense on a lot of different levels," he says. "It gives us access to a whole different audience than we had at Roger Williams. It allows us to play a larger part in the whole resurgence of the downtown area. And it puts us closer to our sponsors and potential sponsors. It was an opportunity we couldn't refuse."

Another way to gauge the festival's success is by the number of artists who want to participate, and where they come from.

"We used to get about 50 to 100 sculpture proposals a year," Rizzo says. "Now we're up to around 200. We're also seeing more proposals coming from outside the United States. This year, for example, we've got a collaborative piece coming from a group of women artists in Macedonia."

This year's Convergence will feature a host of new attractions, including partial stagings of two Mozart operas, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Così fan Tutte*, and screenings of work by local filmmakers. It will even have its own Internet site at <http://users.ids.net/convergence>

Finally, the festival's 10th anniversary celebration coincides with several other major cultural events, including the Providence Preservation Society's annual Festival of Historic Houses (this Friday through Sunday), a two-day art exhibit at the historic Cranston Street Armory (Saturday and Sunday) and a five-day dance festival sponsored by Groundwerx Dance Theater (June 18-22). Just smoke

There were no guarantees back in the summer of 1987 that Convergence would grow, or even survive.

"If I told you we did it all with smoke and mirrors during the early years, I'd be lying," Rizzo says with a chuckle. "We didn't have enough money for mirrors. All we could afford was smoke."

What kept the festival going, Rizzo says, were two key goals: to bring art to the people and to bring people into Roger Williams Park.

"Back then, there weren't many venues for outdoor sculpture. That meant we could have more of an impact, since there wasn't any real competition. It was also the time when you had a lot of controversies about public art. My view was that most of the people who were complaining had never seen much contemporary art, so we decided to bring it to them."

Fortunately, the gamble paid off.

"People loved it," Rizzo says. "We've even had people ask us to bring back certain pieces because they liked them so much."

As examples, Rizzo cites a series of hat-shaped sculptures by Providence sculptor Jay Coogan and a life-sized bronze gardener by New York artist J. Seaward Johnson. The hats were installed in Polo Lake three years ago, while the gardener stood guard at the park's Elmwood Avenue entrance in 1996.

(For both practical and philosophical reasons, Rizzo says Convergence sculptures are installed on a one-time-only basis.)

The festival also found a capable leader in Rizzo, a 46-year-old Smith Hill native and 12-year Parks Department veteran who is also a sculptor and performance artist. He and his wife, Karen, live in Warwick.

"I'm used to working on a shoestring," he says. "I mean, that's what artists do. They make the most of limited resources."

A good example is what Rizzo calls the festival's "piggyback effect." That's when other arts groups such as Groundwerx, which is also celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, and Perishable Theater, which is holding its fifth annual Woman's Playwriting Festival through June 22, put on events that overlap with the festival's schedule. All three groups can then pool their advertising efforts, thereby cutting costs. All the problems

At the same time, Rizzo and Convergence have to contend with all the problems - summer storms, mechanical breakdowns, vandalism - that come with holding an outdoor arts festival in an urban setting.

"Actually, we've been pretty lucky," Rizzo says. "There have been a few minor acts of vandalism, but basically people have been very respectful. In fact, when one of the floating sculptures in the park came loose a few years ago, we got five or six phone calls from people who wanted to let us know. They were actually worried about it."

Rizzo must also confront a city bureaucracy that, at times at least, has seemed to consider art a four-letter word.

"I can still remember a guy at City Hall giving me a hard time about one of the music acts," he says. "He wanted us to go out and hire a drummer at some ridiculously low rate, because, as far as he was concerned, all drummers were the same. I had to explain to him that, no, all drummers are not the same and that for the price he was asking we weren't going to get anyone worth listening to."

Here again, though, things seem to be getting better.

"One of the good things about hanging around for 10 years is that people get used to you," Rizzo says. "Last year, for example, we worked with the Fire Department on a project that called for water from three fire hoses to form an arch over the Providence River. They really got into it." Statewide hopes

Last year's Convergence also turned into a kind of coming-out party, both for the festival and for Providence's revitalized downtown area.

Rather than hunkering down in Roger Williams Park, Rizzo took advantage of a three-day international sculpture conference at the Rhode Island Convention Center to move the festival into downtown. Combined with Gallery Night Providence, the monthly series of art openings and gallery tours that started last May, and the popular "Water Fire" displays by Providence artist Barnaby Evans, the change of venue proved a huge success.

Indeed, Convergence X will incorporate many of the same features as last year's festival, including kayak tours led by Baer's River Workshop and a reprise of Evans's fire sculptures along the Providence and Woonasquatucket Rivers. Other sculpture sites include the Fleet Galleria, Old Stone Square Plaza (now Providence Washington Plaza) and the Roger Williams National Memorial on North Main Street.

As for the future, Rizzo says he'd like to take the Convergence concept statewide. "That's the next step. If we could start it in Providence, then take it around the state, it would be great."

In fact, there will be a spinoff celebration in Westerly during the festival, with sculpture in Wilcox Park.

To further their goals, Rizzo and many of the festival's other participants are holding a Convergence kick-off bash on Thursday at the Cranston Street Armory. The event will also benefit the Providence Preservation Society, which launches its Festival of Historic Houses tours the next day.

Asked if he's worried that all this creative energy might be getting out of hand, Rizzo just leans back and laughs.

"That's why we call it Convergence," he says.

CAPTION: HAPPY TIME: Ronee Jarvis, 6, of Providence, dances to the music of QAZ at Waterplace Park. She's dressed up in Carribean carnival wear.

Journal-Bulletin / BOB THAYER

CAPTION: SCULPTOR MIKE HANSEL, middle, of Newport, talks with Bob Rizzo, second from right, head of the Providence Park Department's Division of Public Programming, about Hansel's sculpture in the lobby of One Citizens Plaza in Providence. Also seen are RIC students shooting the installation for the Convergence web site: Dave Pratt, left, Stephen InDelicato and Tim Lynch.

CAPTION: BOB RIZZO, right, helps Mike Hansel of Newport install his sculpture in the lobby of One Citizens Plaza.

Journal-Bulletin / MARY MURPHY

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