

Clichés rule the thinking of most people who comment on Philadelphia without knowing the 1990s version of the city. The standard knock is that it’s unhip—the place W.C. Fields thought would be a mite better than six feet under, the spiritual and real home of Dick Clark and his ’50s bandstand beat, the old-fashioned “City of Firsts” that never threw off the arts stigma of being Constitution City, birthplace of the nation.

A second cliché is that it operates in the shadow of New York. Doesn’t everyone just drive up to Manhattan when an urge for real culture hits? Don’t Philadelphia artists tremble at what New Yorkers think of their work? Don’t Philadelphia audiences diss their local wares as second-rate stuff?

The images are as stale as a week-old non-Philadelphia pretzel to those who know.

Philadelphia’s arts scene—from historic institutions like The Philadelphia Orchestra to the fast-growing Philadelphia Fringe Festival, from touring Broadway companies to the area’s more than 20 innovative theaters—is bigger and more vibrant than at any point in the city’s history.

In recent years, Mayor Ed Rendell has committed his administration to creating an “Avenue of the Arts” with 16 new and renovated arts facilities on the city’s South Broad Street—Philadelphia’s historic arts thoroughfare. Private philanthropy has also kicked in. The result so far is three newly constructed playhouses, including a smashing new space for the Wilma Theater and the just-reopened Prince Music Theater, which will serve as base for the former American Music Theater Festival, now renamed the “Prince Music Theater” after its new home.

At the same time, construction continues on a new performing arts center that will draw the Philadelphia Orchestra from its historic Academy of Music down the block, and a fabulous restoration is almost done on one of the city’s most spectacular classical buildings, slated to be the new home of the University of the Arts.

The *local* cliché is that the city is undergoing an arts explosion, and it’s accurate.

Music and dance accommodate every taste. In classical music, Philadelphia remains a city with few rivals. The Philadelphia Orchestra, under Wolfgang Sawallisch, remains ranked as one of the best in the world. Also regularly playing in town are The Bach Festival of Philadelphia, the Academy of Vocal Arts’ Opera Theater, and the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society. The Curtis Institute of Music presents scores of performances through the year, as do

the area's other famous training grounds, such as the Settlement Music School and Esther Boyer College of Music at Temple University.

The Philadelphia Ballet enjoys a national reputation. Philadanco, which tours internationally, combines modern dance and ballet in its explorations of black themes. A wide variety of internationally renowned dance troupes come through the Annenberg Center's Zellerbach Theater and other spaces, and a constantly shifting number of local dance troupes keep Philadelphia a center of quirky, experimental dance. Opera Company of Philadelphia hosts a full year's season, though Luciano Pavarotti's annual competition for young singers has been discontinued. Conductor and pianist Peter Nero and his Philly Pops mix genres, and put on a full-year season. Major rock acts come through at stadium sites like the First Union Center, Blockbuster-Sony Music Entertainment Center across the river in Camden, New Jersey, or at smaller spaces like the Theater of the Living Arts on South Street. More importantly, Philadelphia remains a launching city for bands that go national, such as Boyz II Men.

Jazz and gospel, of course, permeate the city as they have forever. The PECO Energy Jazz Festival offers concerts in February. The Philadelphia Clef Club of Jazz and Performing Arts preserves and promotes jazz as an art form. But jazz sizzles all the time in clubs like Zanzibar Blue and the 23rd Street Cafe.

In theater, Philadelphia has evolved from being a renowned tryout town to an expanding theater hive. Internationally significant productions still premiere in Philadelphia, such as the Tony-winning "Master Class," and national road companies ritually visit the town.

Cutting-edge local theater sorts, however, preen more over the exponential development in the last 15 years of Philadelphia "Off-Broadstreet" theater, in which a score of small companies put on sophisticated regular fare. Tops in prestige are the Wilma and Arden Theaters. Other nervy outfits include the Philadelphia Theatre Company, the Freedom Repertory Theatre, and the Society Hill Playhouse.

The visual arts scene, for its part, keeps faith with the city that has been producing major American artists since the days of Charles Wilson Peale and Mary Cassatt. Three institu-

tions—the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Museum of American Art of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Institute of Contemporary Art—are first-class institutions of the kind that draw critics and patrons from around the world. The scores of established and smaller galleries complement the museums, often showing painters and sculptors of local and international reputation.

Perhaps the biggest arts revolution of the last 10 years, however, took place on the literary and film scenes. Traditionally, Philadelphia writers kept more to themselves than night-crawling New York types. That changed with the advent of dueling Borders and Barnes & Noble chain superstores on fashionable Rittenhouse Square, with their crowded reading schedules, and the launching by the University of Pennsylvania of the Kelly Writers House. The latter is becoming a constantly whirring forum for literary readings and discussions that draw writers citywide.

Even more surprising has been the fast expansion of the Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema into a significant stop on the international film festival circuit. It now screens more than 60 prestige films from around the world, attracting both famous and soon-to-be famous directors.

Does anything distinguish the Philadelphia arts scenes besides its volume? Two things, at least. In Philadelphia, black culture is not marginal but central to the artistic ethos in every art except classical music and ballet. Blacks and whites also patronize arts institutions and nightlife together to a degree unusual in many other places.

Second, for every example of corporate, commercialized art in Philadelphia, you can find its non-profit, struggling alternative. The Painted Bride Arts Center, a legendary home of counter-culture and performance art, continues to present eccentric, avant-garde work. The Philadelphia Fringe Festival is now a recognized success, taking over spaces all over town for its performances each fall.

Comparatively unoppressed by the corporate pressure and media hype that drives so much art and arts coverage in New York and Los Angeles, Philadelphia partakes in the mainstream mania of the bigger cities, but continues to go its own way as well.

PHILADELPHIA
METROPOLITAN AREA
POPULATION: 4,952,929

TOP FOUR CULTURAL
INSTITUTIONS
(BASED ON ATTENDANCE)

1. Philadelphia Museum of Art
2. Independence National Historic Park
3. Academy of Music
4. African American Historical and Cultural Museum

The Philadelphia Inquirer

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* is the larger of the two dailies in town. Its main rival, the *Philadelphia Daily News*, is likewise owned by Knight Ridder. Add to that, the paper has to contend with active competition from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, both of which are flogged in town.

With all this pressure, the *Inquirer* has decided to follow the mantra of "local, local, local." During the week, the arts are combined with lifestyles in the "Magazine," a stand-alone arts and features section that contains a mix of arts profiles, reviews and trend stories. The arts staff also generates about 10 stories a month for the *Inquirer's* front page. While the paper does not run a stand-alone Friday arts section, it issues a "Weekend" tabloid section, which contains critical takes on the arts, jazz, movies as well as listings of everything around town from auctions to author visits.

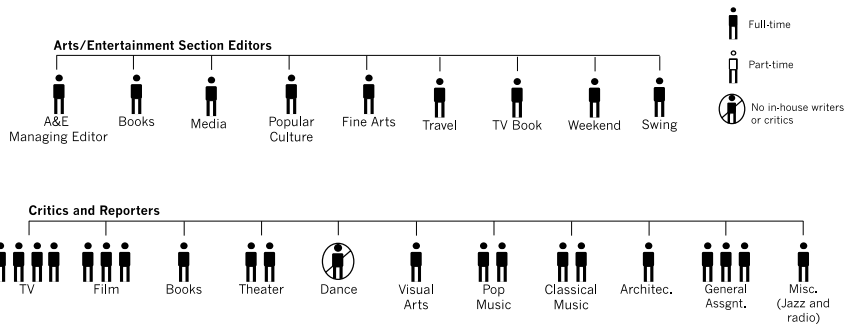
On Saturday there are some reviews under "Entertainment" in the business section. The Sunday arts and entertainment section runs heavy coverage of popular culture, and is chock full of lists, consumer guides and short movie and record reviews. There is likewise a separate book review and TV guide.

In general, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* has most of its pieces written by staff members. It occasionally uses freelancers and runs virtually no syndication pieces. Yet for a paper in such a culturally rich town, there is no full-time dance critic. And for a town in which the mayor is a major arts booster and contains such renowned organizations as the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the paper is also short on general assignment arts reporters.

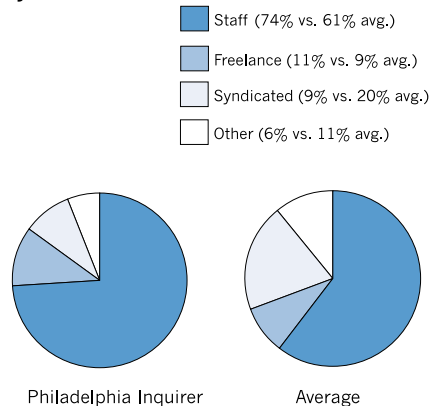
Of all 15 papers in our study, the *Inquirer* had the most articles on classical music. Its overall output for music, though, was not remarkably strong since the amount of coverage given to rock and other music genres rated only average. Its proportion of space for movies is also unusually low.

Owner: Knight Ridder Daily Circulation: 390,880 Sunday Circulation: 878,660

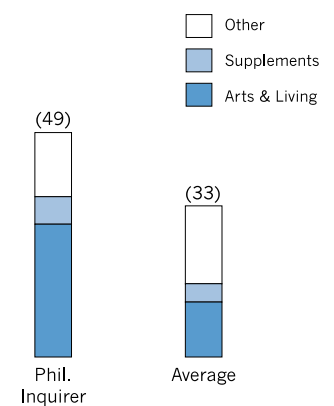
In-house Arts Staff (does not include copy desk and freelancers)



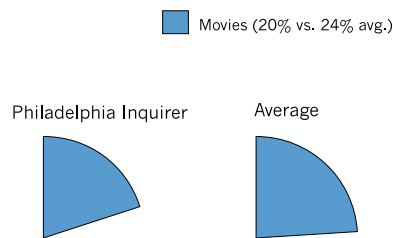
1. Bylines



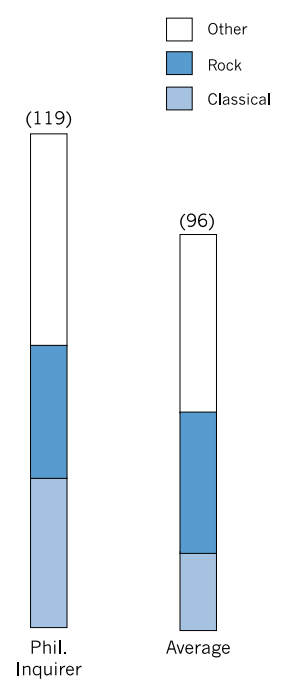
2. Decorative Arts



3. Movies



4. Music



Notes (All data for October 1998. Comprehensive data available at www.najp.org.)

1. Proportion of editorial space assigned to arts and culture stories, listings excluded, written by in-house staffers, freelancers and syndicated wire services compared with the 15-newspaper average

2. Number of decorative art stories, listings excluded, in the daily Arts & Living section, weekend arts supplements and all other non-arts sections compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating the total number of decorative arts articles

3. Proportion of editorial space assigned to arts and culture stories, listings excluded, devoted to movies compared with the average

4. Number of music stories compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating the total number of music articles

ARTS COVERAGE IN PHILADELPHIA: A CRITICAL VIEW

Is it enough for a city's critics and arts reporters to flag virtually every arts product or event, make some routine noises, then provide an "If You Go..." box? Or does it matter whether and how critics and arts reporters make sense of the flood, offer analyses of ripples within it, and continue to sound off on arts developments beyond the city limits, drawing links between the local scene and world at large?

If the first goal satisfies, Philadelphia arts coverage looks stellar. If the second matters, performance is far less impressive, and varies significantly among media outfits.

The bulk of Philadelphia arts coverage takes place in the city's two daily newspapers, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Philadelphia Daily News*—both owned by Knight Ridder—and two "alternative" weeklies, the *Philadelphia Weekly* and the *City Paper*. Although some minor radio and TV coverage of the arts exists, Philadelphia TV and radio stations on the whole simply abdicate.

As in most major cities, the main daily and Sunday newspaper, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, by some measures provides the most arts coverage. But if one compares the actual arts copy published in a week by either of the weekly papers and matches it against copy in the *Inquirer*, it's a close call. All three exceed the coverage in the *Daily News*, which does a lively job of reviewing in music, film and theater. Since that paper's ambition in arts coverage is limited by its space, tabloid identity, lack of a Sunday edition and perception of its readership, this piece will concentrate on the others.

Almost alone among major city broadsheets, the *Inquirer* does not publish a stand-alone arts section on Friday. Instead, it publishes only a "Weekend" section, offering a frosting of movie reviews atop a compilation of consumer-info lists and light features geared to going out.

Both high and popular arts once received prominent play in the Sunday paper, and arts staffers wrote long, complex and well-reported articles. Now, the Sunday "Arts" section almost always favors pop culture and pieces tend to be shorter and less in depth. Further complicating arts coverage has been the paper's decision twice in recent years (with dance and architecture) not to replace a major full-time critic when that person departed. Coverage is now contracted out,

sometimes to recognized experts, sometimes to less distinguished but available hands.

Think pieces are rare, and tend more to the lightly reported trend that can be packaged nicely with art. Most stories continue to be hooked to next week's movie opening or concert, and take the form of profiles and advancers. Only modest space exists for arts pieces. Even on Sunday when a separate arts and entertainment section runs, the three to four pieces that begin on the front typically exhaust the space, since the inside is crammed with consumer guides, lists, capsule movie reviews and short album reviews. Meanwhile, the Sunday book review has been forced to run syndicated reviews, reports from local book clubs and other features that diminish the section's critical seriousness. Finally, arts stories rarely make the front page unless they fit the profile of a business or urban affairs story that the news editors are more familiar with.

The news about *Inquirer* arts coverage is not all bad. The paper recently hired a sophisticated assignment editor for fine arts from the *Village Voice*. Finally, while the quality of the *Inquirer* arts staff varies, it includes first-rate critics of national reputation. Devoted arts types in Philadelphia, though, regularly express disappointment in *Inquirer* arts coverage to the paper's staffers, and sometimes vote with their feet. The paper's circulation, both daily and Sunday, has dropped sharply over the past 15 years. *The New York Times*, which aggressively distributes in Philadelphia, continues to steal well-educated readers away.

Stepping into the perceived vacuum in treatment of the arts have been the *Philadelphia Weekly* and the *City Paper*.

Each week, the *Weekly* offers an "A&E" section with regular critics on fine art, dance, theater, classical music and other traditional beats. On different weeks, fine art or fringe music may lead the arts section, and arts stories sometimes lead the paper as a whole. One regular feature, "Artsbeat," highlights breaking arts news. The *Weekly's* writing is often markedly hipper, livelier, more imagistic and imaginative than equivalent copy in the *Inquirer*. The paper takes cultural literacy for granted in its readers. In the traditional spirit of "alternative" papers, *Weekly* writers exhibit a skeptical edge toward commercial and corporate promotion. The critics, almost uniformly younger than their peers at the dailies and with their ears closer to the ground in their arts, tend to make more daring choices about what to cover, and to issue more daring judgments.

"The kind of stories that the A&E division can provide will become the 'water cooler' stories that people will hold on to. We can hang that on the hook of pop culture or our high culture community."

Ann Gordon, Arts Editor
The Philadelphia Inquirer

The rival *City Paper* similarly offers an arts section every week called “Critical Mass.” Like the *Weekly*, *City Paper* is not afraid to lead its section with a piece about the fine arts or supposedly rarefied dance, or to lead the paper as a whole with an arts story. Its regular critics, like those of its rival, write snappily, with thorough knowledge of local institutions and reputations. While *City Paper* critics may be a bit less shrewd, incisive and subtle than their peers at the *Weekly*, both staffs provide needed cosmopolitan sensibility in a journalistic setting in which the dailies stick to a more populist tone and agenda.

Remaining coverage can be summarized

briefly. WHYY-FM (90.9), the local NPR station, resists general radio neglect of the arts, covering them with refined taste on such programs as “Radio Times” and “Art Beat: The Radio Journal of Arts in America.” It also has a reporter who does regular stories on the arts. The leading AM news station, KYW (1060), offers an occasional arts piece. Philadelphia TV stations deliver less, preferring to waste their precious non-breaking news minutes on excessive coverage of sports, weather and upbeat feature nonsense. All there is of note is one sophisticated movie critic, Bill Wine, on the local Fox station (Channel 29), and occasional one-minute takes on movies by Pat Stoner on WHYY-TV (Channel 12).

VOICES FROM THE STAFF

There is a growing resentment in the Philadelphia arts community that the *Inquirer* looks the other way for arts stories. Part of the intention behind my hire was to focus more on Philadelphia’s arts. We have a strong, very healthy performing arts market here. We cover it strongly, and are constantly on the lookout for young artists. If there is a mantra we have it’s “local, local, local.” Our philosophy is to cover local artists of all disciplines in the greater Philadelphia area with an eye to art events and trends that might develop out of New York City or Washington, D.C. and occasionally out of Europe.

Ann Gordon, Arts Editor, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

We are well supplied with critics in almost every area of the arts. Many of these critics, though, are either inexperienced with or uncomfortable with reporting. Many feel it should not be part of their job, and historically it has not been part of their job. It is something they have not been trained to do and have no affinity for. It can leave the paper short-handed when it comes to reporting about the arts.

What we need is more general assignment arts reporters. There is a lot of arts news in Philadelphia. We constantly find ourselves short of people who can really take the role of generalists—good reporters who can tackle almost any subject in the arts and make it intelligible. For example, reporting about the financial health of local cultural institutions requires almost as much business and local government reporting expertise as it does expertise on arts. That’s a new thing for newspapers, to report on arts and culture in the same way as they would report on government, to scrutinize the books, so to speak. We feel it is important to do. Art is a business. It has always been a business.

Peter Kaufman, Night Editor, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*