Rolex Arts Initiative

The Joys of Arts Mentoring

Peter Hall, Mira Nair and others discuss their Rolex program experiences

By Cate Doty

At a recent symposium held at Columbia, eight artists explored their experiences in mentoring younger artists, arguing that while creativity cannot be taught, talent can be cultivated into producing great works of art.

The symposium featured Moroccan-French writer Tahar Ben Jelloun, author of L'Enfant de Sable (The Sand Child); Indian filmmaker Mira Nair, director of such acclaimed films as Monsoon Wedding, and Vanity Fair; Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, author of Death and the Maiden; Sir Peter Hall, founder of the Royal Shakespeare Company; acclaimed British actress Geraldine James; and Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize in literature.

The panel discussion was one of a series of events showcasing the Rolex Mentor and Protege Arts Initiative hosted by Columbia's Arts Initiative and its World Leaders Forum, and by Barnard College, during the first week of December. The series marked the public unveiling of the program and further engaged the Columbia community in a sustained and varied dialogue with some of the world's leading artists.

Created in 2002, the Rolex Initiative pairs young artists with experienced mentors in their fields for a year of guidance and teaching. Besides the symposium, the Columbia series included a public reading at Barnard by writer Julia Lefler, a production of Rolex mentor Toni Morrison, and a performance in Miller Theatre of Tabequag, a one-act play written and directed by Lara Foot, who was Sir Peter Hall's protege.

The panelists responded to questions on the challenges of mentoring posed by program moderator Gayatri Spivak, Columbia's Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities.

"You cannot teach creativity—how to become a good writer," Llosa said. "But you can help a young writer discover within himself what kind of writer he would like to become."

James, best known to Americans for her roles in the Academy Award-winning Gandhi and in the PBS miniseries The Jewel in the Crown, said she had been lucky in her own career to encounter teachers who became her mentors. "Mentoring is putting you in touch with the best that you can be in yourself," she said. "It is about enabling and challenging." Sir Peter said that the beauty of mentoring—and of the Rolex program—is that it doesn't have to be focused on market demands. Instead, the results should be visible in the artists themselves, he said.

"What is extraordinary about this whole scheme is that it demands nothing. I don't have to submit a report," he explained. "But the consequence has been the growth of another artist, in the most wonderful and profound way."

From mentoring, the conversation swiftly moved to a discussion of the borderless nature of art and the seductive potential of creativity. Panelists said that the Rolex initiative reflected the perspective that talent and the work itself are more important than nationality and gender.

"We are trying to create the idea that you mentor across cultures. Culture doesn't know boundaries," Dorfman said.

"Art is the one thing that crosses every boundary, every barrier," Llosa said.

Soyinka added that he pushes his protégés and pupils to search within their own cultures first, to find the idioms of expression that work for their art. "It's the place to begin, always—to return to home, literally.

Nair reflected that regardless of wealth or fame, the work of an artist never gets easier. "It is always exciting because if we don't tell our own stories, nobody else will," she said. "This is the fire that keeps us going."

Much of the post-panel conversation with the audience centered on the nature of the creative process and the potentially subversive nature of art.

In response to a question from a journalism student, Llosa commented that the "truth" of art lies not in its ability to "mirror" reality but, rather, in its power of persuasion. Art, she said, allows us to dream, to expand our vision beyond the constraints of our existence; to fulfil desires that are unattainable in real life. In so doing, it enables us to reach an understanding of life that is not completely accurate depiction, can never convey.

"Art can reveal how poor "real life" is in comparison with the richness of the artist's vision—which is why, he said, authoritarian regimes instinctively distrust artistic creation."