

Keith Powers: Destruction of the sanctuary

By Keith Powers, Correspondent

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We should be remembering this summer's Quarry Dance at Flat Ledge in Rockport, which brought us closer to the inner and outer beauty that exists everywhere.

But we won't.

We should be talking about Georgia O'Keeffe. Not just her great work - vivid, idiosyncratic, suggestive - but the life she led, and how it was sumptuously curated at the Peabody Essex Museum.

But we can't.

We should be re-living the music we've heard from Matthew Aucoin, or Elena Ruehr, or Julian Wachner, or Sofia Gubaidulina, and how it was spun into existence on stages important and obscure all across New England this year.

But we will not.

We should be celebrating the ambitious communities of artists that are growing to maturity around us. The inimitable A Far Cry, whose "Blue Hour" song cycle seems destined to find performances for years to come. The brash American Modern Opera Company, a collection of artists who will change repertory and performance for a generation.

The phenomenal vocalists Roomful of Teeth, who keep surprising. Even the Tanglewood Music Center fellows, who make themselves into a top-flight orchestra in a matter of weeks, and tackle the most challenging music all summer long. Groups like yMusic, or Brooklyn Rider, or the Dover Quartet.

Not this year.

The arts have always been a sanctuary, but that veneer of protection has become exposed.

The very idea that the arts are a safe place has fueled the problem. No, it's not just in the arts, but the arts are emblematic of it.

Suddenly emboldened, and liberated from years of silence, women and men who have been preyed upon sexually have come forth in number to confront their abusers. The scenario is predictable: men in places of power have used that authority to force unwanted sexual encounters. It happens when the victims were too intimidated to speak out, and the abuse has remained unspoken for years. These aren't clumsy, sophomoric sexual overtures; these are crimes.

Men in the arts are at fault. The power structure in arts organizations lies at the root of the problem: symphony orchestras, television studios, theater troupes, film companies — all are traditionally top-heavy with individual men holding professional authority over many. Those men are abusing the privilege. And we should not look away.

We turn to the arts for relief, at the very least. An afternoon in a museum, thinking about O'Keeffe or Manish or Lane, and not about politics. Two hours in a concert hall, shutting out the noise of the world for Mahler or Bach or Beethoven. Watching Jessica Lange's dance troupe, and thinking of nothing else but her elegant movement.

That relief lies at the root of the problem. We create a special category for the artist, exempt from the norms. We label it genius, and build a protective wall around it. The materials of that wall include our admiration, along with the artist's insecurities, instabilities, and foibles—and, something that is becoming all too apparent — their predatory instincts.

The conductor who molds 100 musicians onstage into a marvel of expression is not allowed to corner a soprano in his dressing room because of it. The well-known playwright cannot rape because hundreds applaud his works. A film producer cannot molest every woman he's alone with, simply because he can offer them a job.

This isn't some esoteric discussion about whether we should shun Wagner's music because of his anti-Semitic ideas; his peers were the only ones who could have addressed his prejudices. This is about our peers. The people in our midst, in authority. We need to fight back. Men need to fight back.

In the same way, this is not a problem to be blamed on current politics. Respect for individuals is crumbling in our society, and we don't recognize honesty as a crucial in public life. We are scared, and intimidated, by current politicians. But that's a separate — and newer — problem.

In the arts, the excesses of power have a longer history than the current infantile political administration. That dynamic needs to change. Yes, it begins with raising boys so they become men who respect women, and themselves. So that they become men who will squash any thoughtless sexism or racism that they hear—anywhere, anytime.

I am part of the problem, and I don't know how to solve it. I have listened in awe to James Levine conduct "A German Requiem." I have transferred that awe to the man, assuming his musical greatness meant personal integrity.

I was wrong. But I see no way of fixing that path of perception. I won't, and neither will anyone else, ever be able to discern from someone's actions onstage, what will happen after the applause dies down.

But I can speak out. I can insist that women be included at all junctures in the artistic process — especially in presenting organizations — and be consistent about it. We need to bring women into every level of decision-making in the arts. We need executive directors at arts organizations to stop, look at their management peers, and create more balance.

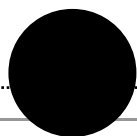
We need more women conductors, working regularly with the best orchestras. We need to demand that the work of women composers gets performed. Demand it, without stopping, until it happens. Women need to know the theater, and the film set, are safe places where actors can work without fear of attack. We need to listen to women when they speak out.

Because that has not happened, we celebrate nothing this year. Nothing, if the future does not bring change. Because the actions of our artists have undermined the greatness they've brought to our lives. They are destroying the sanctuary. The sanctuary that we've made for them, because of them, along with them.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](#); email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com.

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