

# The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, TUESDAY, MAY 4, 2004

## Republicans Lure the Arts To Politics And Protests

By JULIE SALAMON

Could it be that President Bush has made politics cool again for the arts in New York? Nothing in recent memory has stirred the far corners of this world like the prospect of the Republican National Convention at Madison Square Garden from Aug. 30 to Sept. 2 and of the crowds that will visit to record the event and to protest or support it.

This occasion has made unlikely partners of scruff and style, uniting old-time protesters, counterculture artists and mainstream producers as well as the "Sex and the City" crowd from the world of design, galleries, public relations and sleek magazines.

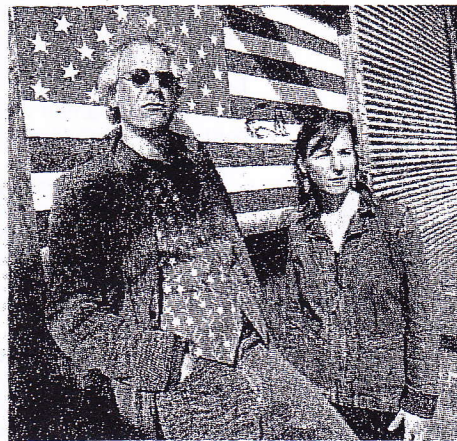
"Right now what's sexier than politics?" asked Heather Grayson, the actress and playwright who attracted strong notices for her solo show "After the Storm," based on her experiences as a soldier in the first American war against Saddam Hussein.

Dozens of arts organizations are making plans for at least four nights of political theater during the convention at East Village clubs, established theaters like Symphony Space, public libraries and of course the streets. The Internet is throbbing with information and strategies exchanged by people often identifying themselves by first name only or by acronym (FEVA, UFJP, THAW, WW3, NoRNC).

They want to make it clear that this is not the same old same old. In a recent e-mail discussion of who should speak for the various groups, Alexandra Tager, who rents art to the film industry when she is not organizing protests, said, "This presents a P.R. challenge to those of us who hope to tell our story to the world and to debunk the myths and stereotypes of violent-uninformed-crunchy-freaky-scattered protesters bent on wreaking havoc for the heck of it."

At the office of Downtown for Democracy,

*Continued on Page 6*



Shannon Stapleton for The New York Times

Chris Wangro and Boo Froebel plan the Imagine Festival of Arts, Issues & Ideas.

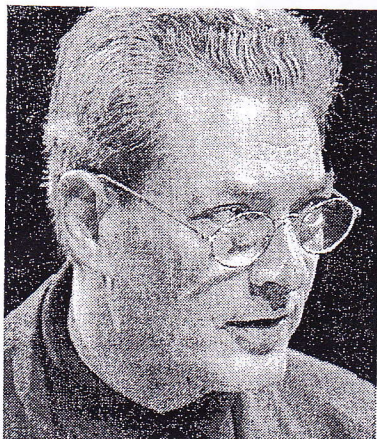
a political action committee, Erik Stowers, a founder, said, "Usually when reporters hear artists are doing something, they go, 'Ha ha ha, they're going to dance around a building.'"

That is not what Christopher Wangro, a special events impresario, has in mind. "The Bush administration's ideas and policies have really ignited people," he said, adding that the convention "gives us a chance to respond."

Mr. Wangro has a long list of non-crunchy, nonfreaky credentials. Now a private operator, he is the former director of special events for New York City's Department of Parks and Recreation and has produced big public events like a parade of elephants for Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey and Pope John Paul II's appearance in Central Park.

He began planning for the Republican convention about a year ago. He and some colleagues arranged a series of discussions with focus groups, advertising and marketing executives, and strategists who had worked in the Clinton and first Bush administrations. From those discussions came the Imagine Festival of Arts, Issues & Ideas, which is planning at least 50 events.

Fund-raising began in March, when Agnes Gund, emerita president



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

The writer Paul Auster at a reading in March that raised \$75,000 for Downtown for Democracy, a political action committee.

of the Museum of Modern Art, held a cocktail party at her home on the Upper East Side. Details of the festival are to be announced on May 24.

"We're not partisan," said Boo Froebel, an Imagine Festival organizer, who is a curator for the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria on 42nd Street. Then she added: "But we don't want people to neuter themselves of political opinion. This is not the 'boring' festival."

At Symphony Space the Thalia Follies, a cabaret show of political satire, will run every night of the convention. To help write the sketches, E. L. Doctorow, Roy Blount Jr. and Mary Gordon have already been recruited. After the show the audience can stay to watch television coverage of the convention on a big screen onstage. "You can get wine and beer and even popcorn to throw at the screen in congenial company," said Isaiah Sheffer, artistic director of Symphony Space, who organized similar shows during the Vietnam War and Watergate but not since.

The Asia Society will present Forgiveness Project, a multidisciplinary theater work based on a classic Chinese opera about a warrior's revenge, and there will be a staged reading of Sophocles' "Electra" at the Lincoln Center Performing Arts Library. Dance Theater Workshop will offer a Teen Poetry Slam with Danny Simmons (co-founder of Def Poetry Jam), and Joe's Pub will have something, not yet decided. The Bowery Poetry Club will remain open 24 hours a day with a roster of politically themed theater, music and poetry.

Deanna Zandt, creative administrator for the Poetry Club in the East Village, said her idea was "to give people a place to come together to have a good time, to burn off some energy, to have a safe outlet for their outrage at this."

Which doesn't mean there will not be plenty of street theater, perhaps still the easiest way to attract attention. "There's going to be 15,000 journalists of various kinds in New York City for those four days, and they're going to be bored a lot of the time," said Andrew Boyd, whose Billionaires for Bush troupe made its debut at the Republican convention in Philadelphia in 2000. "Our experience in Philadelphia was that the journalists were looking outside the convention for the pulse of the street, and in many cases it was more interesting to the public and the journalists than the proceedings at the convention."

The Billionaires pretend to be rich people — sort of updates on Thurston Howell III, the millionaire on "Gilligan's Island," carrying martinis and golf clubs — and mock Bush administration policies by pretending to praise them. (Saying things like "We're very happy George Bush is in town and happy 40 million people in this country don't have health care.")

Convention planners appear to be unperturbed. "We are confident that the N.Y.P.D. and the U.S. Secret Service will create a security plan that will allow the Republican National Convention to conduct its business in a safe and orderly manner, while ensuring that other individuals are allowed to voice their opinions at that time in New York City," Rori Patrise Smith, a convention spokeswoman, said.

During the convention in Philadelphia, Mr. Stowers of Downtown for Democracy handcuffed himself to other protesters in a human chain intended to block the route between the convention and delegates' hotels. Instead, Mr. Stowers and others in the chain were arrested and spent nine days in jail.

"I think street theater is great, but I decided after that if your intention is to defeat Bush and foil the Republican attempt to hijack our country, the most direct method is to directly engage in the political system," Mr. Stowers said. So he organized Downtown for Democracy, or D4D, registered it as a political action committee and has been raising money through events intended to attract cultural types more inclined to network and party than to protest. In March a reading featuring Jonathan Franzen, Paul Auster, Joyce Carol Oates and Michael Cunningham at Cooper Union raised \$75,000; an art auction earlier netted \$130,000.

The money so far has gone to five Congressional candidates and to Moving America Forward, a political action committee in New Mexico, a swing state. "People can't quite grasp what we're doing at first," said Mr. Stowers, 25, who studied archaeology and anthropology at Brown University, dropped out of a Ph.D. program at Princeton and then began work on a novel.

Instead, Mr. Stowers is using e-mail. So much that he was wearing braces to protect inflamed nerves in his hands during an interview in his office in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, as he worked to promote D4D's next event: a design auction, promoted on the organization's Web site as featuring furniture, lighting, flooring and tabletops, both new and vintage, by American designers.

New and vintage could also describe what is happening. While a smattering of plays, visual art and music emerged in reaction to United States involvement in Iraq, many people in the arts became disengaged from politics once the war began.

"There had been a lot of anxiety about taking a stand or being too political," said Valentina Fratti, a theater director and organizer for Theaters Against War, or THAW, a group of 200 theaters that formed about 18 months ago to organize protests against the invasion of Iraq. "That climate has completely changed. Now everyone seems to have a united goal, and the details of the politics don't matter. People want to get rid of Bush."