

*The following is the text of the acceptance speech by **Christopher Blank** upon receiving the Literary Arts medal at the Arts and Humanities Gala on October 29, 2010.*

As the first arts journalist to receive the literary arts award from the Germantown Arts Alliance, I must first thank my fellow local arts reporters and critics who have vastly broadened my perspective during the decade I've lived in Memphis.

Most of us are freelancers now. We continue to write about the arts for one reason, and it's not money or medals. It's because we know how important the arts are to our community. We identify with creative spirits. We think they deserve to be recognized and, of course, critiqued.

Some people read negative reviews in the newspaper and wonder if hypercritical experts aren't hurting the arts. We critics often wonder the same thing. We're an existential clique. What is our role? To promote? To parse? To provoke? Lately, I've been saying that my job is to give people something to talk about—to be a conversation starter. The more we talk about the arts, the more we bring attention to that cultural language that brings us together as a society.

The language of the arts, and its value to our intellectual evolution, transcends race, age, gender and politics. Not one of you out there tonight would consider truth and beauty to be a bad investment. Recently there was a profile on in the New Yorker about the billionaire David Koch who, right now, is one of the biggest backers of the Tea Party movement.

After getting past my initial liberal panic, I realized something I liked about this conservative, Wall Street billionaire whose politics are so different than my own. He has given millions upon millions to cultural institutions in New York City.

A sample:

- \$100 million to modernize Lincoln Center's New York State Theater.
- \$20 million to the American Museum of Natural History.
- Last spring, he walked past the fountains at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and pledged \$10 million to fix them up.

Now, if you've ever gone to a nice restaurant in New York City, it's not hard to spend \$10 million there. But imagine for a minute what kind of enormous impact a David Koch could have in a community where arts groups know how to stretch a buck.

The cost of fixing one fountain in New York would allow the Germantown Arts Alliance to give annual grants at its current levels for the next 200 years. That's without accrued interest. Fixing a fountain in New York is over half of what it cost to build the new Playhouse on the Square. One fountain in NY equals two Opera Memphis headquarters.

The Memphis College of Art just opened its new graduate school downtown, a 5-story, renovated building with art galleries, classrooms, and studios. One fountain in New York would buy us three of those.

\$10 million would run the Memphis Symphony Orchestra for three years. That's jobs for 85 people. Those people are paying taxes, contributing to our economy and educating our children. Some will say, "Sure, but the quality of the arts in New York is so much better. That's why it costs more!" It's true that many of the world's great artists go there because the wages are better.

Correspondingly, an audience member can spend \$150 to see "Memphis" on Broadway, or spend \$150 to see an entire season of Broadway in Memphis. Your money, your choice.

I like to remind people that even though we don't have big stars here except when they tour, we wouldn't have the kind of vibrant and diverse local arts community that already exists if the homegrown talent wasn't so passionate about making art.

In the mid-1970s the stage actor and director Ellis Rabb, who is from Memphis, won Tony and Drama Desk Awards, then came back home to direct "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at Theatre Memphis. Here's what he said about wanting to work with the non-professionals in his hometown. "The talent is not necessarily in the apple; It's in the orchard," he said.

I've seen a huge variety of performing arts in many big cities. I can confirm that the orchard here is indeed fertile. It's certainly good enough to be taken seriously and to be talked about, at least as much as we talk about basketball.

All of us here tonight—artists, patrons, critics—are at this dinner because we believe in the potential of that orchard, which has produced a crate full of talented apples, from Kathy Bates to Craig Brewer to Elvis.

We also know that it takes the support of the entire community to help that orchard grow.