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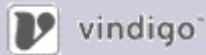
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A patron at the helm?

L.A.'s cultural leaders size up the mayor after 18 months and ask: Is there ...

By Diane Haithman, Times Staff Writer

HEY, is that any way to talk about the mayor of Los Angeles?

In the play "Water & Power," written by Richard Montoya for the comedy troupe Culture Clash, a character describes Antonio Villaraigosa like this: "Underneath those expensive suits beats the heart of a homey who got kicked out of Cathedral High."

ADVERTISEMENT Is that insolent evaluation OK with His Honor?

"I love those guys, I really do," Villaraigosa replies. "Like Bertolt Brecht, theirs is a people's art that reflects the struggles, trials and tribulations, hopes and aspirations of the community."

Then, seated in his stately offices, Villaraigosa flips open his suit jacket to show the label: Emilio Yuste. "People always say that, but actually my suits aren't expensive if you look at them," he says. "I'm lucky that I kind of fit off-the-rack."

Villaraigosa's seamless segue from Brecht to affordable suits is typical of his style when discussing arts and culture in Los Angeles: half sound bite and half spontaneity.

The mayor's role, says Villaraigosa, is "to promote the arts, to galvanize the city around the arts." He ticks the points off on his fingers. "To support, promote, galvanize."

The mayor believes that, as a cultural capital, Los Angeles no longer needs to beg for attention. "I think people are increasingly realizing that Los Angeles is a world-class center for arts and culture," he says.

At the same time, Villaraigosa knows the stats: "L.A. spends less on the arts on a per capita basis than almost any city in the country," he observes. "We spend about \$3.23, New York spends \$14, San Francisco \$27 and Chicago — I don't know what the number is, but it's higher, much higher, and we've got to change that."

Adds the mayor: "I intend, in coming years, with public-private initiative, to really increase our investment in the arts. And not just around the idea of cultural tourism; I think we need to promote the arts for art's sake," says Villaraigosa, whose offices are filled with a revolving gallery of loaned artworks by local artists, including such luminaries as Robert Graham and Patssi Valdez, as well as works by senior citizens



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Villaraigosa shrugs when asked about L.A.'s apparent defensiveness when it comes to comparisons with New York: "I actually don't think about New York, to be honest. I don't. I believe that L.A. is the city of America's hope and its promise. It is to the world what New York was in the 20th century and London was in the 19th. There is an energy here in L.A. that is very different from almost anywhere else."

Assessing the actions

THERE'S no question that many in the arts backed his run for mayor and had high expectations that he would be an energetic supporter of culture. Now, a year and a half into his administration, does Villaraigosa seem to be living up to these expectations?

To some, it appears that he is putting his money — that is, the city's money — where his mouth is, investing to bring a stalled city mural project back to life. Others are impatient, saying that although he can be eloquent on the subject, he spends little time on these issues and they wish he'd focus more attention on boosting the arts. They are waiting for him to make a key appointment: a Cultural Affairs Department manager who will draft a new blueprint for the city's arts policy.

Artists had reason to hope that the city was getting a different kind of mayor when Villaraigosa took office. His predecessor, James K. Hahn, outraged many by announcing plans to dismantle the Cultural Affairs Department, a primary source of grants for grass-roots arts events and artists. Hahn reversed his decision one week later — and it was then-Councilman Villaraigosa who acted to reinstate \$1.7 million of Hahn's proposed \$3.9-million cut to the department's then-\$11.8-million budget.

Detractors, however, point out that he hasn't done as much for the department as mayor. He has increased the budget only from \$9.58 million in 2005-06 to \$9.94 million for 2006-07. (These figures were provided by Cultural Affairs.)

Adolfo V. Nodal, Cultural Affairs general manager from 1988 to 2001, is one of many who point out that Villaraigosa's action as a councilman helped garner support from artists during his run for mayor. "The arts community was really behind him, because they were so against Hahn," says Nodal, now project director for the Annenberg Foundation. (For his part, Hahn calls the charge that he was indifferent to the arts "a rap," blaming the economy: "Everyone was taking cuts," he says.)

Philanthropist Eli Broad, who spearheaded the fundraising effort for the Walt Disney Concert Hall, says he saw signs of Villaraigosa's commitment to the arts long before Villaraigosa became mayor. "When he was speaker of the Assembly and we needed help," Broad says, "he arranged for \$5 million from the state budget, twice, for Disney Hall."

Villaraigosa can take credit for a significant arts coup in 2006: In early August, Villaraigosa and leaders at the J. Paul Getty Trust announced that they had made a \$7.8-million deal to split the cost of preserving "América Tropical," an 18-by-80-foot mural painted in 1932 by Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros on an Olvera Street building, reviving a project that had languished for almost two decades.

At the time of the agreement announcement, Rushmore D. Cervantes, then general manager of El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument, said the project had been revived because "the Getty was getting fed up and they gave us a deadline."

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When asked about this, Villaraigosa bristles. "I'm not much for ultimatums," he says. "What I said was: 'We realize that you've invested a great deal of money in this project, but we think it's in your enlightened self-interest to invest more, and we'll match it.' And we did."

Lyn Kienholz, founder and president of the California/International Arts Foundation, did not see the mayor take the same financial initiative when it came to another high-profile project: "Los Angeles 1955-1985," an exhibition that opened in March at the Pompidou Center in Paris.

Villaraigosa was front and center at a February media conference to announce the event, which featured works by 87 L.A. artists and an exhibition focusing on the work of Santa Monica's Pritzker Prize-winning architect, Thom Mayne. But Kienholz, whose foundation acted as Los Angeles' liaison for the event, says that the city contributed "not a thin dime" to support the \$3-million exhibition, paid for by the Pompidou Center. "The city just doesn't get it," Kienholz says. "They're not real big with backing international stuff. It's tragic."

Even some of those who praise Villaraigosa for a strong appreciation for the arts and a "homey's" understanding of L.A.'s multicultural character believe that the jury is still out on his performance.

Cindy Bernard, an artist and director of the Society for the Activation of Social Space Through Art and Sound, a young organization that presents experimental music and has relied on city grants to augment its \$65,000-a-year budget, agrees with Nodal that Villaraigosa has a chance to forge a bond between the arts and entertainment. But the mayor's biggest push, Bernard believes, should be toward raising the Cultural Affairs budget. "It comes down to money," she says.

Fred Dewey, executive / artistic director of Venice's Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center, believes that Villaraigosa should make a directed effort to connect private sector funding to L.A. artists. "I don't think at the moment he really has any presence in the arts community; he has not established himself as an advocate; it's all smoke and mirrors," Dewey says. "Let's have a poet laureate for the city, and let's have the mayor announce it."

Some see Villaraigosa as a mayor who is always in the spotlight at a cultural event such as a street festival or a pop concert — but who is hard to pin down when it comes to spending quality time with arts leaders. Some observe that most visitors are lucky to get 15 minutes. (In fact, it took more than a year to pin down the mayor for a 25-minute interview about the arts with The Times and an equally brief follow-up a few months later.)

"He has the components of what it will take to really set a vision for L.A.," says Margie Reese, the most recent Cultural Affairs Department general manager, who resigned last summer. "The thing that bothers me is that he has such a full agenda; he has to trust this task to someone else. I am disappointed that scheduling didn't allow him to have as much face time with me as I would have liked."

Gordon Davidson, founder of the Music Center's Center Theatre Group, says that whenever he runs into Villaraigosa, the mayor suggests getting together to talk arts — but it has yet to happen. "I know he's enthusiastic; he said it to me even at his inauguration, that somehow we have to think of something big and important that would put L.A. in a unique position in the arts scene — that's a tall order," Davidson says.

Nicole Possert is co-chair of the Friends of the Southwest Museum Coalition, a group fighting plans by the Autry National Center, which controls the Southwest museum, to move most of the Southwest's Native American artifacts collection from the museum's Mount Washington home to the Autry's Griffith Park campus.

The Southwest is in Villaraigosa's former council district, and Possert says she has yet to see Villaraigosa go to bat for the museum as mayor. "We all know he's a rock star," Possert says. "The question is, can he bring some goods to the city in general?"

Villaraigosa says the best way to serve the Southwest collection has yet to be determined. "In fairness, there have been a lot of voices, and not all of them agree on what should be done there."

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Although L.A. arts watchers may disagree on whether Villaraigosa deserves the "arts mayor" title, they concur that it's a good time for the city to be asking.

Reason No. 1: Cultural Affairs, without a permanent leader since Reese resigned in June, is conducting what the mayor's chief of staff Robin Kramer jokingly calls an "intergalactic search" for a new manager.

And the first order of business for that cultural figurehead will be to oversee the development of a new "cultural master plan" for L.A. — the first since 1991, when Nodal introduced the city's initial effort, a controversial document that demanded "the social and environmental responsibility of art and artists" and called for equitable distribution of city arts dollars among the city's diverse ethnic groups.

It's a different city in 2006, a chance to update the agenda — although Villaraigosa says that diversity will remain high on the list: "I am very supportive of taking art to the people, to the neighborhoods," he says.

Where arts go on the agenda

ARTS leaders do not expect that Villaraigosa will draft plan specifics; rather, they look to the mayor to make a forward-thinking choice in selecting a new department manager.

Interim Cultural Affairs general manager Karen Constine says the department is "assessing what a preplanning process looks like" for the master plan. She says that the plan might include outlining ways to make better use of such assets as City Hall's Bridge Gallery, or raising the profile of L.A.'s reputation as the "mural capital." The city has allotted \$250,000 to develop the master plan, which probably won't begin until the new culture chief is appointed

"We are sorely lacking in cultural policy, not just for Los Angeles but for the state of California," says Claire Peeps, executive director of the Durfee Foundation and president of Grantmakers in the Arts, a national arts support organization. "If Los Angeles can seize this moment and take the lead in drafting a cultural policy to be of service to the city, then it will be of service to the greater citizens of California."

Even though they are willing to leave the master plan to the new cultural manager, a number of local arts leaders, including Nodal, would like to see the arts added to the mayor's now-seven-point agenda, joining education, economic development, transportation, public safety, energy and environment, fiscal responsibility and diversity.

Says York Chang, 33, a labor attorney and artist who was named by the mayor to be a member of the Cultural Affairs Commission, "We want to see it on the list. That would really cement the idea of him being the arts and culture mayor — the 'vision' mayor."

Observes Villaraigosa, "The arts has, without question, got to be on the agenda for the mayor of the city that is America's cultural, arts and entertainment capital. But obviously when you are focusing on issues, people want you to deal with the bread and butter issues first: public safety, education, traffic, homelessness. And then you can deal with dessert."

He pauses. "Remember, I said: 'Bread and butter issues, then you can deal with dessert.'"

Under Villaraigosa, the arts turn up in unexpected ways. Callers to the city's 311 information system are treated to music by local musicians while on hold. And instead of, say, a crystal paperweight in the shape of City Hall, visiting dignitaries often receive a book, "Writing Los Angeles: A Literary Anthology."

Villaraigosa has also distributed tokens of L.A. culture internationally. During a trade mission to Asia in October, he included among his gifts to officials bowls designed by Frank Gehry and works of *papel picado* (the Mexican folk art of paper cutting) by Margaret Sosa. During that trip, he also visited Beijing's 798 Arts District to announce that two dealers of contemporary Chinese art, Karon Morono and Eliot Kiang, would open Morono Kiang Gallery in downtown's Bradbury Building in the spring.

Villaraigosa also professes an eclectic love of music. "I saw Shakira last night; I go to a lot of concerts," he says. He is quick to crank up his office stereo system to show what's in the CD player.

He draws attention to the music as it changes tempo. "See? That's not Spanish. That's Middle Eastern," he says, proud to recognize the difference.

It may not be easy to get time with the mayor, but Montoya of Culture Clash got his 15 minutes when he was appointed to the Cultural Affairs Commission. Though he jokes about the brevity of the audience, he likes what he heard. "He asks you what your ideas are, and before you can take a breath he tells you what *his* ideas are," Montoya says.

"It's funny — I was preparing to talk about Christo in Central Park," he continues, referring to Christo and Jeanne-Claude's high-profile 2005 New York project, "The Gates," which involved a 23-mile pathway of saffron-colored fabric panels. "And *he* brought it up before I could even get it out of my mouth.

"The mayor needs a signature arts and culture event so we can somehow begin thinking of L.A. as being on the world stage in arts and culture," Montoya adds. "I don't think we're there yet, but I think the mayor wants to get us there."

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