

The Main Line Times

The Barnes Files: “Marty and Inga, did the dog eat your homework?”

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by Evelyn Yaari

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Things must be getting desperate. No less than much-admired “Radio Times” host Marty Moss-Coane and Philadelphia Inquirer architecture critic Inga Saffron have used the airwaves to spread lies about the Barnes controversy. In what was mostly a reasonable discussion about the Barnes with New York Times architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff, Marty and Inga repeatedly worked in the absurd old chestnut about the Barnes not being able to survive in Merion. Either they did not do their homework or they did their homework but deliberately chose to continue misleading the public. That is indeed troubling. For years, the Inquirer has misrepresented the Barnes story, but WHY? Et tu, Marty?

I’m curious, Inga. You mentioned a few times a business plan for Merion that appears unworkable. Would that be the Barnes in Merion that could meet its known operating costs with good management? Or would that be the proposed Barnes on the Parkway that has been called “highly risky” by experts and that will have an annual deficit of at least \$4.5 million? Where is the business plan? And please do tell us who is going to carry that burden for a Parkway Barnes in the future. No doubt those who earn their livelihoods in the arts and cultural institutions in the region that are hanging on by a thread would like to know the answer to that question too.

Since June of 2007 the Barnes in Merion has had the authority to admit at least 144,000 visitors plus school groups. With the new admission price at \$15, this provides a strong revenue stream. If you add the additional revenue from parking fees, now also \$15, plus profits from the bookstore, there is more than enough money to operate the Merion site. As art dealer Richard Feigen said in his starring role in the documentary, “The Art of the Steal,” if someone cannot manage the relatively simple Merion site properly, they should “get another job.” That might hurt the feelings of current director Derek Gillman, but then Mr. Gillman’s focus is on managing a construction project, not managing the Merion facility. For his salary of over \$400,000 per year, one would hope he could do both.

The other canard thrown around pointedly by Inga Saffron concerns the local community around the Barnes, whereby Saffron would have the world believe that there are insurmountable obstacles between the institution and its community. Where has she been? Everyone knows that it is the local community members who pursued the initiative for the huge increase in allowable visitation to the Barnes. Numerous writers from elsewhere, including New York and as far away as Perth, Australia have commented on the presence on Latch’s Lane of the signs attesting to the community’s devotion to saving the Barnes. How did those signs escape the eyes of Saffron as she walks up the lane from Merion Station? Next time she comes to the Barnes, perhaps she will linger long enough to get the story straight.

The Barnes can and should remain in its home in Merion, where everyone who wishes to can have one of the most extraordinary cultural experiences in the world. And hopefully Marty and Inga will take the opportunities they have to say so.

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