

The Main Line Times

“Barnes’ film a hit with locals at NYC debut”

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By Cheryl Allison



Protest buttons on her hat and a box of Barnes flyers in hand, Nancy Herman of Merion prepares to board the bus last Tuesday to the NYC screening of “The Art of the Steal,” a documentary on the Barnes. -- Photo by Pete Bannan

Boarding a bus outside New York’s Lincoln Center after midnight for the trip back to Merion last week, members of a group fighting the Barnes Foundation’s move to Philadelphia were anything but sleepy.

They were energized.

Whether the film they had just viewed does anything to alter plans to move the gallery’s priceless collection of art out of its 80-year home on Latches Lane — and they’re not ready to concede that it can’t — they were reassured that more of the world will hear its story.

About 20 members of the Friends group traveled to the Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall Sept. 29 for the U.S. premiere of a new documentary on the long and convoluted saga of the art collected by Merion resident Dr. Albert C. Barnes.

They were joined there by a number of other Lower Merion and Philadelphia-area residents to see “The Art of the Steal,” directed by Philadelphia filmmaker Don Argott and executive-produced by Villanova resident Lenny Feinberg.

The film, which traces the personalities and politics that converged to put Barnes’s art on the now seemingly inevitable path to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, had already caused a stir at the Toronto Film Festival a few weeks ago.

As a feature at the New York Film Festival, its first public screening at the 1,000-seat Starr Theater sold out quickly. A second screening had been added for this week.

The movie has been picked up by Sundance Selects for commercial distribution perhaps early next year.

It comes as the Barnes Foundation, nearly a year after a “symbolic” groundbreaking on the Parkway, was set to present concept plans for a new museum building to the city’s Art Commission Wednesday morning. (See related story on this page.)

For those who have followed the Barnes story in recent years, there will be few revelations in the film, although it does include some recently recovered home-movie footage of Barnes himself, which will add some human dimension to his usual portrait as an irascible eccentric.

The movie does offer a thorough telling, unfolding almost in mystery form, of the events that led up to Montgomery County Orphan’s Court Judge Stanley Ott’s December 2004 decision that Barnes’s will could be altered and the art moved to save the financially struggling foundation.

It lays out a case that a group of Philadelphia’s art elite and city power brokers worked together to bring the Barnes collection into the city and, in the name of increasing public access to the art, boost tourism.

The most frequent criticism of the documentary, among generally favorable reviews, is that it is one-sided. The filmmakers said they asked other key players — representatives of the Barnes Foundation and the three charities that have pledged to fund the move — but they declined to be interviewed.

Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell did go on camera and speaks candidly about how, while he was still the city’s mayor, former Philadelphia Museum of Art chairman Raymond Perelman came to him with an idea to move the Barnes.

On screen Rendell also talks about dealings with Lincoln University, to which Barnes in his will had left control of his foundation. At the same time Lincoln’s role on the foundation’s board of trustees was being diluted, the university was the beneficiary of millions in state aid.

Rendell’s remark that Lincoln officials “weren’t blackmailed” into dropping resistance to the plan — “I made it clear they were getting this money regardless” — drew a laugh from the New York audience.

Other key moments in the film include an interview with the Barnes Foundation’s lightning-rod former director Richard Glanton, who orchestrated a landmark tour of some of the Barnes’s masterpieces of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art in the 1990s and then brought suit against some Merion neighbors when they complained about the tour buses that lined Latches Lane after the art returned and the gallery reopened.

“I think it was the greatest exhibition in the history of Western civilization,” Glanton says of the tour, and talks of being greeted elsewhere as a “conquering hero” and having dinner “with Princess Di.”

In another scene Latches Lane residents Robert and Toby Marmon are bemused, even now, that Glanton leveled charges of racism against neighbors and filed a federal suit — later dismissed — “under the Ku Klux Klan Act.”

And, explaining why the stakes in the Barnes dispute are so high, there is art dealer Richard Feigen, describing how one would try to assign a value to just one of the Barnes’s great works, Cézanne’s “The Card Players.”

“How much money [can be] in one place?” he asks. “You’d need some kind of nation to buy it.”

Much attention in the film is drawn to the revelation, sometime after Ott issued his decision, that some \$107 million had been added as a line item in a state capital budget for a new Barnes museum building in Philadelphia, well before the Barnes Foundation came to Ott with its plea that the institution was failing financially. Ott has said he was never informed during the court proceedings of the allocation.

On the bus ride home, that item in particular had Friends members talking. They wondered: what would many people have to say in the city, where libraries and recreation centers might have closed because of budget shortfalls and schools need more support, if they knew about that \$107 million?

Gary Adler is the Merion resident who uncovered the budget item when he asked Rendell’s office a couple of years ago where some \$25 million the governor had pledged for the Barnes move was coming from.

He was one of the local residents who traveled to see “The Art of the Steal” and “enjoyed it very much.” As a nearby resident, he and his wife, Phyllis, have visited the Barnes a number of times, and what troubles him is “taking the art away” from the setting Barnes created for it. “I don’t like a will being broken,” he added.

Adler thinks the film “is fair.” “It would have been more fair if others had talked,” he added. “If I was on that Barnes team and I believed what I did was correct and honest, I would” have given interviews, he said.

Aram Jerrehian of Wynnewood also attended the premiere. He was active with the Friends group when it filed a petition with Ott’s court to reopen the Barnes case in late 2007. He has also been critical of the state Attorney General’s office for not stepping in.

It’s that office’s role to monitor nonprofit organizations. Instead, Jerrehian said, it has been clear from the record that the office has been “predisposed” in favor of the move. “This movie is further proof of that,” he said.

More generally, Friends member Evelyn Yaari of Wynnewood said that when the film is released, it will “give the general public a view of what has been going on here.

Seeing the movie was “a wonderful uplift,” she added. “We’re the little nucleus of this group” asking for reconsideration of the move, she said. “To be there in the [theater], to hear people giving thunderous applause, I felt like we had all these potential friends.”

Contacted this week, Barnes spokesman Andrew Stewart said no one from the foundation would “be available to comment.”

He said Barnes director Derek Gillman had seen the film in Toronto but would not wish to comment beyond public comments he had already made that the documentary was “technically ... well done,” that its information is “all familiar” and that it is “clearly one-sided.”