

A New Era of Grand Performances

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By Eddie Kim

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DTLA - Before taking a job that would help define Downtown Los Angeles, Michael Alexander was immersed in the world of public arts policy. He had fought to secure federal funds for dance programs in the 1970s, worked with nonprofits and advocates, and later joined the city of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs.

It was there that he discovered a fledgling lunchtime concert series on Bunker Hill. The developers of California Plaza had an obligation to fund public art events, but wanted a fresh and ambitious approach. Alexander applied for the job and took over as artistic director in 1990.

Michael Alexander, who has led Grand Performances since 1990, retired this year, though he is staying on during the summer to help smooth the transition for new Executive Director Mari Riddle.

In the nearly 30 years since he was hired, Alexander has displayed steady leadership and acumen for wrangling philanthropy, politics and programming in a changing Los Angeles. In the process he made Grand Performances' summer season of free concerts and talks one of the best event series in Downtown (gratis or otherwise). Nearly every week, big crowds from across the region flock to the Cal Plaza Watercourt for the shows.

So it was big news last month when Alexander announced his retirement from his job as executive director. He is staying involved in an emeritus role as new Executive Director Mari Riddle, who touts experience with local nonprofits and economic development, learns the ropes.

"The fact that Mari comes in with an incredible history of working in L.A. is important. We've seen how people from outside L.A. come to head an organization but often need time to understand the city and how it functions," Alexander said. "She's worked with a lot of community service organizations, and has a network that is different than the one I've had."

An urban planner by training, Riddle has served as the president and CEO of the Centro Latino for Literacy and as program director for Community Partners, which offers management and financial expertise to nonprofits and community projects. In a fitting coincidence, Riddle also performed at California Plaza as part of Grand Performances programs in the mid-1990s, and has since followed the series as an audience member and donor.

"One of the exciting things is that the organization is such a well-oiled machine," Riddle said. "The quality of the productions and the warmth and care people show to performers is special."

Part of that is because of Alexander's longtime compatriot, Director of Programming Leigh Ann Hahn. She joined Grand Performances in 1992 and continues to play a lead role in shaping each season's lineup.



The success of Grand Performances helped create momentum for other free or low-cost public programming in Downtown at a time when there were minimal options, noted Deputy Director Nurit Smith. The mission of Grand Performances will not change under Riddle, but she is already examining how the organization could bring more art to more audiences, including outside of Downtown. One such move is its “LAX Presents” series, which will stage 18 performances a year for the next three years at the airport.

“Uniting L.A. through art means not just bringing people Downtown, but making new connections elsewhere,” Riddle noted. “We’ll never lose our Downtown affiliation, but how do we keep growing into larger settings?”

Alexander, meanwhile, is looking forward to taking some time off before plunging back into the world of arts advocacy. He imagines trips to Sacramento to push for causes like Grand Performances on a broader scale.

“The arts community in California has a lot of hard work in front of it to find funding,” Alexander said. “I hope to keep working on agendas to bring art into as many lives as possible. What I’ve learned in 27 years with Grand Performances is that people from all socioeconomic groups want quality arts experiences in their lives.”

Grand Performances is at 350 S. Grand Ave., (213) 687-2190 or grandperformances.org.

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