

# ANNETTE BENING: PUBLIC ARTS ADVOCATE

BY DEBORAH BEHRENS PHOTOS: MARINA RICE BADER

The following is Part II of a lunch interview conducted at the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills in late October 2005. Part I, featured in Issue 29 (Jan./Feb. 2006) as our cover story, is available online at [www.lastagealliance.com](http://www.lastagealliance.com). Annette Bening is currently appearing in *The Cherry Orchard* at the Mark Taper Forum.



## INSECURITY & ECSTASY

Actors who subject audiences to mediocre performances annoy Annette Bening.

"I think I feel it more in the theatre because it's happening right in front of you," she says. "When I don't like something I think, how can you have the guts to stand up there and ask all of us to watch you? For two hours! You don't deserve it."

"That's what I tell young actors. You've got to be deserving of the kind of attention you're seeking. Because if you're a performer, you're saying, 'look at me.'"

Insecurity is a topic Bening consciously tries to address when speaking to acting students. She believes it is a necessary demon one must learn to live with because it never goes away no matter how old you get or experienced you become. Even for somebody with an acting resume like hers.

"Every time you're attempting something creative, the same demons come to stalk you," she explains. "So it's not a question of not having the demons, it's a question of finding a way to deal with them and not be surprised. 'Yes, I know you're there but you've got to be quiet right now because I have a show to do. I've got to go out in front of people and be open.'"

She pauses for a moment, running a hand through her hair and glancing out the window before leaning forward to elaborate.

"When I'm working it doesn't mean that they don't get to me because sometimes they do. I have my days when I'm afraid of being in front of people. Not measuring up. Of not being good at what I do. Or blowing it. Or whatever it is that can happen. I feel it all the time. So it's just a question of going ahead anyway."

An admirer of Stella Adler, Bening believes that despite today's cult of celebrity, actors must still study theatre to truly learn their craft.

"You need to study dramatic literature because it's within the size of those plays and the size of those ideas and the size of those intellects that created those pieces that you begin to see yourself. You begin to see your own inadequacies, your own strengths, your own weaknesses, your own joys and your own music. Then you can stretch yourself as an individual. That's basically what Stella Adler's talking about as training actors."

"Now it's harder and harder to find that kind of ethos in the contemporary culture because when people think of actors, they think of celebrities. But really it's about a craft. Hopefully if you learn a craft, maybe you'll have some artistic moments within it."

When asked if she's ever experienced such lightning-in-a-bottle, Bening relates a story about windsurfing on a lake. She caught a breeze her first time up and got taken for an "incredible" ride. She spent the next three hours hoisting up the sail trying to snag another one. It never came.

"It's that ecstatic thing," she says. "I think it happens in every creative pursuit. It's very elusive, and very, very, very, very rare. That's why people continue to pursue it once they've had a taste. But I think it's something you should not talk about." She smiles. "You know? I would never want to name it more than that."

Bening says she sees a "fair amount" of current Los Angeles area theatre, including the Taper's recent production of David Mamet's *Romance*, but admits it is "not as much as I could. My husband doesn't really go, so I'm usually attending with other friends of mine."

One of the best productions she saw was an amateur staging of *Spoon River Anthology* in Santa Barbara held in the back of a church with age appropriate casting. She says it really taught her a lesson. "It's not necessarily always about having professional actors. Some of the best productions of plays I've seen were in acting school. Because it was just a dark room. There was no bullshit, no fancy lights, no fancy costumes. It was just the play and actors staged in a modest way."

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"Sometimes great plays, like Chekhov or Shakespeare, can be the best in those circumstances because it's just the core essence of the play that you're trying to get at. It's not about people trying to promote themselves."

## MOVIES & POLITICS

Despite critical acclaim for her body of film work, Bening says she's learned how to separate her experience of making movies from the outside world's reaction to their final prints.

"What I've learned is that the process of making a movie is mine," she states. "That's one thing I can say that nobody can touch — that experience of making it. Whether or not it works, or people like it or people receive it well or people see it, is another thing. That's out of my hands. But what's in my hands is when I go to the set that day, what is my experience."

"I enjoy just making them. If it goes well, then there's another life that happens. If it doesn't go well, it disappears!" She laughs. "Then you just made the movie. So people can't comment on that. People can't write criticism of that. That's mine."

Many people have wondered when Bening will step behind the camera to direct. Her professional opinion and knowledge on the set is known to be highly regarded. While admitting she has finally reached a point where she is often more experienced than the person directing her, Bening claims it won't be anytime soon.

"What will do it is a story that I can't bear for someone else to direct. The idea of somebody else choosing what happens with it will be too difficult. But I don't know when that will be. My kids are little, and there's just no way I can do that right now."

Bening's four children range in age from 13 to five and despite her numerous film

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projects, plus a demanding performance schedule playing Madame Ranyevsakaya in the Taper's new production of *The*

*Cherry Orchard*, she is a completely hands-on mom. According to her, it is a role she coveted long before becoming an actress.

"I wanted kids so badly before I wanted to be an actor," she admits. "It was just part of my DNA, part of the nuts and bolts of my physiology. I had a real desire to have that in my life. I never thought about it in any other way. So I was lucky that I could and that I met someone and it all worked out."

She laughs. "Now the only problem is that you have to actually raise them!"

Bening and husband Warren Beatty were highly visible political opponents to Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's numerous propositions during the November 2005 special election. A week after this interview was conducted, they made a highly publicized attempt to crash one of his San Diego political rallies and were denied admission by members of Schwarzenegger's staff.

"Do we need a wristband to listen to our governor?" Bening said. "He represents all of us."

When asked about their upcoming political plans in light of the spring gubernatorial race, Bening hedges. "I think we'll



ALFRED MOLINA AND ANNETTE BENING IN *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* AT THE MARK TAPER FORUM UNTIL MARCH 19

CRAIG SCHWARTZ

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always be involved in politics,” she concedes. “That’s for sure. He wants to have a voice. He’s been an activist since the ‘60s.”

And while First Lady Maria Shriver may have crafted a new job description for future governors’ wives that requires both media savvy and celebrity clout, Bening says she has no immediate plans to campaign for the Sacramento position.

“Primarily I’m an actor,” she stresses. “I think what I do as an actor is the thing I can be most useful at. But I’ll certainly be out there politically. How much I choose to do I really can’t say. I think being politically active, politically educated, voting and participating are things we all have to do. Especially those of us in the creative community. And be aware of how government affects our lives and our children’s lives.

“Certainly in our state we have a lot to do. The governor is running again, and there will be a lot to pay attention to.”

## PUBLIC ARTS ADVOCATE

On California Arts Day last October, Bening stood on the Capitol steps in Sacramento and appealed for increased funding for the arts in California’s public schools. A member of the California Arts Council, she cited the Schwarzenegger administration’s failure to provide equal arts education for children stating, “Education and art in our culture should not be treated as a luxury for some, but as an absolute necessity for every one of us and every one of our kids.”

In his January 2006 State of the State address, Gov. Schwarzenegger appeared to answer the charge, surprising arts administrators across the state by announcing his proposed 2006-07 budget included a new \$100 million Art and Music Block grant “to support standards-aligned art and music instruction in kindergarten and grades one through eight.” His proposed budget also plans to fully fund Proposition 49, the after-school programs initiative passed in 2002, at \$428 million. Policy experts expect arts and music programs to benefit from those monies as well. The budget still faces a long legislative gauntlet before obtaining final approval this summer.

Bening declined to comment further on these new developments since our fall interview. At that time, she said she believes it is the government’s responsibility to provide arts support regardless of private philanthropy.

“Public arts funding is important on a grass roots level,” she says. “It gives organizations the skeletal structure from which they can then go out and raise money. We as a culture need to

recognize the importance of arts and arts education because if we’re not involved in it on an organized governmental level, then only some people get it. And only some kids get it.

“I only got a taste of it because I went to public school in San Diego and they took us to the local symphony, the opera and the theatre. It’s a way of living life and it’s a way of appreciating life. I don’t think you have to become an actor or a dancer to appreciate what that does for you.”

According to a report released in January 2006 by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, California has the distinction of having the country’s lowest per capita spending on the arts—nine cents compared to a national average of \$1.09. During the fiscal year 2004-05 state budget cuts, the California legislature reduced California Arts Council funding from \$18 million to \$1 million. For fiscal year 2005-06, they approved a slight increase to \$1.5 million. NEA funding, arts license plate sales and other income sources brought the CAC’s total budget to \$3.3 million.

For fiscal year 2006-07, the Governor recently announced a proposed 57% increase over the 2005-06 CAC budget to \$5.1 million. The additional funding largely stems from increased revenues generated by last year’s state-approved fee hike for the arts license plate.

Conversely, funding for the Division of Cultural Affairs in Florida will grow in the 2006 fiscal year from \$15.1 million to \$29.4 million, a 94.7% increase. The New York State Council on the Arts currently enjoys the highest state funding at \$45.3 million.

Bening is optimistic about Muriel Johnson, the newly appointed CAC president, whom she describes as a “hard working, good hearted person” but thinks it will still take a lot of work to restore CAC funding to previous levels.

“The Republican agenda is very clever and they think it should be in the private sector. Because people in creativity just want to survive no matter what. They’ll go out and find private money. And that’s exactly what they want people to do. Because then they won’t turn to the government anymore and say, hey come on, you’ve got to help us out. You’ve got to at least give us a leg up, so we can survive.

“It’s really a change. That’s what is important for people to know. It didn’t used to be that way. It’s part of the whole gradual shift our country is going through. Can you imagine a world without music? Painting? Dance? Theatre and movies? That’s what we’re talking about supporting. It’s pretty grim.”

Bening recognizes that other critical everyday life issues relating to the war, employment and health care are at the top of state legislators’ plates. “We’ve got a lot of problems we’re trying to tackle right now. Arts aren’t even on the radar screen.”

