
Cultural Daily

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Heroes for our Holidays

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, December 23rd, 2010

The news that Disney has hired Britney Spears to be a role-model for the studio's current crop of young performers – a fact so disturbingly bizarre you could not make it up – makes me think about who we consider heroes these days.

Ask many young people and they'll name sports figures, music stars or other celebrities. Ask many adults and they'll talk about our men and women in military service, or people who achieved fame with a single act, like Captain Sully Sullenberger. Ask CNN and they'll ask you to nominate "everyday people changing the world."

I'll grant heroic accolades to some of these people, especially those who lay down their lives for others or have completely devoted themselves to making our world a better place. The rest are not heroes in my book, but they are perceived as heroes by our media through news specials and feature stories, Facebook followers and TV movies. By my measure, they are famous, renowned, celebrities. But they are not heroes.

My definition of heroism is more long-term. I believe you exhibit heroism through your work and by the example of how you live your life over years and decades.

Which makes me advocate for artists as heroes.

Artist-heroes are the people who contribute to our creative culture bravely, with fierce determination, over the arc of their lives. They are our storytellers and image-makers who carry our collective narrative and express it through their individual voices and hands.

Many of them have trouble paying the rent, because we live in a society that rewards celebrity but doesn't place much value on the rewards excellent culture brings to us all.

Once you reach a certain depth of your creative expression, and in order to reach that depth, you are a heroic artist. You are presenting something of yourself to the world, a world that will far more easily crucify you than praise you. In order to be a good artist, you have to show your vulnerability, your confusion, your process and – most courageously – your point of view, in this era where any unorthodox point of view can make you a social or political outcast. To arise in the morning to confront a naked page or stage or canvas, to find something within yourself to mark upon it, and to let others see that mark – that is today's heroism of the highest order.

I think of Iranian filmmakers Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasulo, jailed for six years for the

films they made. Panahi, whose wonderful film *Offside* about Iranian girls trying to get into a stadium to watch a World Cup match was released here in 2006, has further been banned from directing or writing or leaving the country for 20 years. I think of imprisoned Chinese poet Liu Xiaobo, who won this year's Nobel Peace Prize. I think of the artists who have spoken out against the Smithsonian's politically-motivated, culture-endangering removal of David Wojnarowicz's "A Fire in My Belly" video: AA Bronson, Robert Mapplethorpe, Patti Smith.

Here in Los Angeles*, I think of Jose Luis Valenzeula and Evelina Fernandez, who get up every morning and walk to the Los Angeles Theatre Center in their struggle to keep alive the only theater that truly reflects what this city is today. I think of poet Abel Salas who's reinventing the arts salon in Boyle Heights. And playwright Donald Freed who, at age 78, is in the most productive moment of his career as America's most incisive political playwright. And quiet revolutionary Ben Caldwell who has been creating a place for young people to shine as artists, poets and filmmakers in Leimert Park since 1984.

These are some of the artist-heroes who should *really* be our role-models.

Who do you think of?

*Disclosure: Some of these people are my friends. I'm proud to be the friend of heroes.

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