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Aldemaro Romero Jr.

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# Milch Sees a Great Future for Art Administrators

## Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“I didn’t choose art, art chose me.” That’s how Professor David Milch explains his personal and professional fascination with the arts. “I came from a family where there was always music or always something artistic happening. It was where I felt at home; it was where I found people I could relate to, found ideas, and found the outlets to share the creations we would make with a wider group of people,” says he.

Milch, a native of Long Island, New York, has a bachelor’s degree in theater from Wesleyan University in Connecticut and a master’s of fine arts from the University of California at Los Angeles. Today he is the director of the master’s in arts administration program in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College, City University of New York.

But why did he choose arts administration as a career? “I think over time I started to see where my strengths lie, and I found a process that was unique. I liked the holistic view—seeing not just what happened at the end but everything that led up to it,” says Milch. And he continues: “Thinking about it from different angles, I began to realize that there are a lot of different pieces in this puzzle. I really wanted to see how they all fit—at least when they work!”

As he says, there are many different pieces but also many different kinds of people with whom one must work. How do you prepare for that as an art administrator? “To be successful, you have to learn how to deal with the widest range of people you can. I’ve had artists walk in who wanted to help me build the set that I was building, and I’ve had artists walk in who expected everything to be laid out on a bed of roses. I’d like to think that I go into every experience not expecting it to be one way or the other but instead let that person tell me what his or her needs are. Then I figure out how to manage the situation.”

So, as an arts administrator you have to be a problem solver above all. “Yes. I used to joke



Professor Milch at his office.

Photo by Shoval Tshuva

when I first started studying theater that theater is just applied psychology or applied philosophy. Whatever it is that the artist is working on, you have to become an expert in that field. The most exciting thing about our career is that it changes every time.”

Milch believes that failure or success in this career all comes down to professional empathy. “When students engage, they develop these incredible connections and relationships. There is something called professional empathy that makes you successful. Each individual is going to express that in different ways, but it’s being able to listen and understand what that other person needs or wants and how you can best supply it.”

So then, what do we really teach in an arts administration master’s curriculum? “Understanding how to work with the artists in that practice” says Milch. “We’re dealing with

numbers, we’re dealing with artists, and we’re also dealing with communities and audiences.”

But what about parents who think that if their son or daughter gets into this business, he or she will not be as successful as one’s peers? “We are going to have people working in non-profit institutions with very entrepreneurial mindsets or with an understanding of how to raise funds and resources in a more commercial setting. If we take theater, for example, the majority of Broadway productions start in the non-profit sector. So you’re not getting to a commercial production without understanding how the non-profit system works, where the development of the artist is happening, and how that functions. The connection between those two exists in our field and exists in the people whom we’re training as the next generation of leadership. I think the market is only going to grow in terms of what we have to offer as skilled professionals in the field.”

Based on what we see on Broadway and at concerts, art exhibits, and theatrical productions, technology is playing a bigger role than it has in the past. The question is how to keep up with all the innovations that take place constantly in the arts. Milch has a very clear perspective on this subject: “I think of it in a really simple way, which is that we’ve always had to keep up. Now we’re talking about technologies, but our field has always been the place where artists think twenty or thirty years ahead. We’ve always had to incorporate new technologies. We understand that we have to be nimble.”

And Milch goes further. “Another practice that I really instill in our students is that they need to read the trades. And those trades can be everything from The New York Times to Backstage to Art Forum or Art News. They need to read them every time they come out and need to be aware of what’s happening and where, because you’re going to find who you are as an individual in this field and what strength you have. Your strength may be that you know how to code or that you know how to talk to people, so you’re going to be the one who gets that gig or gets that connection when there is a tech show. I joke that when I was freelancing, I used to get the ‘how to choreograph for non-dancers’ jobs, because I knew how to talk to people who are afraid of dancing—that was my niche. It’s the same thing with technology. If you know how to use it, or if you know who does, then you’re going to be the one who’s able to keep ahead and be in the decision-making position.”

He says that for those interested in getting a masters in Arts Administration at Baruch College, the route is very simple. “You can find us at <http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/wsas/academics/ma-arts-administration/index.html>.”

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