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Arts Leader Who Gave Bronx Culture Respect and Renaissance by David Gonzalez

Bill Aguado is arguably the Bronx's biggest champion for the arts.

He is also tone-deaf and colorblind.

Now, before any wisecracks, consider that Maine's prestigious [Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture](#) recently honored Mr. Aguado for his ardent support for artists over the three decades as director of the [Bronx Council on the Arts](#). Other honorees included [Merce Cunningham](#), the choreographer, and [Philippe de Montebello](#), the former director of the Metropolitan Museum. Not bad for a guy who longs to be a saloon singer.



Bill Aguado retired in May after almost 30 years as director of the Bronx Council on the Arts and promoter of a rich, varied network of borough cultural institutions. The mural at the James Monroe Senior Center was painted when he ran the center.

Photo: Ángel Franco / The New York Times

What Mr. Aguado lacks in musical talent, he more than makes up for in passion.

“My father loved to read poetry,” recalled Mr. Aguado, 63, who retired as director in May. “As a kid I sat in his lap while he read poetry in Spanish to me. It was such an important experience that I could feel his passion sitting there.”

Those lessons, from a man who owned a Harlem candy store, taught him that culture is found in any neighborhood, not just in august institutions.

“When we got here in 1982, the South Bronx was still smoldering,” said Wally Edgecombe, the director of the [Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture](#). “We got the charge from our president to come up with cultural programming. Somebody came to me and said we’d never get any audiences. But Aguado said, ‘This is where it is needed the most.’ The arts brought this community back.”

So Mr. Aguado — who can by turns be Falstaffian or fierce — set up programs to nurture, showcase and reward the borough's artists, arguing for their needs

with private donors and public officials. In an abandoned public school on Longwood Avenue, he created a groundbreaking gallery and studio that has produced two MacArthur grant winners. In an area where outsiders thought the Yankees were the only attraction, he created a cultural corridor; today, that stretch of the Grand Concourse is a destination for music, art and theater lovers.

Yet the reaction Mr. Aguado first encountered when people learned he was promoting Bronx artists was puzzlement, if not derision. People asked if he carried a switchblade. He did not, but his comebacks were equally cutting.

“There was no respect for what we were trying to do here in the 1980s,” he said. “The image they had was there was no local culture. They saw me as a social worker who had to educate people about the beauty of the major cultural institutions downtown. My belief was the art from our communities had to be recognized, and not just as folklore.”

Originally an educator, he arrived at the council in 1978 after running several alternative schools. He had been raised on activism, he said, but took the council

job as a grants administrator once he realized “the revolution was never going to happen.”

Three years later, he was tapped to head the council, which had been formed in 1962. He said he would stay until the board found a suitable replacement. But the longer he worked with the borough’s diverse artists, the more he took to his job.

Many of those artists found a home in the gallery he carved from Public School 39, a vacant building that civic boosters feared would succumb to the destruction that had devastated the surrounding blocks. He turned it into the [Longwood Art Gallery](#) and converted a dozen classrooms into art studios. The theater troupe [Pregones](#), after outgrowing its space in East Harlem, took up residence. Some artists did, too, literally.

“I had the head of the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) visiting Longwood one day,” Mr. Aguado said. “I had just told him how nobody lives here but it was open 24 hours. Right then comes this artist, Ted, in his bathrobe carrying an empty coffee pot. He looks at me and says ‘Hi, Boss!’ and keeps on walking.”

The gallery’s life spanned the neighborhood’s rebirth, as local housing groups rebuilt the area. About six years ago the city put three new schools into the building. The gallery found a new home at the Hostos Center, which had thrived with the council’s support.

As in other once-blighted neighborhoods, there has been speculation that the South Bronx will become an artists’ haven. Some have gone so far as to call it SoBro, a term that rankles a few locals.

Mr. Aguado shrugs off the suggestion, noting how the parts of Port Morris that have been rezoned in anticipation of an artistic invasion are too isolated from mass transit and lack stores and supermarkets. He also resents the efforts of one landlord who, he said, has been squeezing out longtime artists.

“The landlord told the artists they could always go to B.C.A. for help with the rent,” Mr. Aguado said. “But I am not about to use our funds to subsidize a landlord. And I’ll tell that to foundations who ask me about this guy. We do not want the South Bronx to become another Dumbo.”

The Bronx cultural scene over which he has presided includes an opera company, a chamber music group, a Hunts Point dance troupe and a gallery in a Mott Haven apartment.

In one recent collaboration of local musicians, an African [kora](#) player was paired with a musician playing a traditional Chinese stringed instrument. “It was the most incredible minute and a half of music between two people that I had ever heard in my life,” he said. “A lot of our communities are hybrids, and our cultural expression is hybrid.”

Although he is retiring, he is staying on as a consultant to his successor, Deirdre Scott, who has worked at the [Studio Museum in Harlem](#) and been on the council’s board. And he won’t stay away from the places he has sustained over the years.

During a visit to Pregones Theater, which now occupies a renovated building off the Grand Concourse, Alvan Colon Lespier, the company’s associate artistic director, greeted him with a warm embrace. An upright piano sat in a spotlight on the otherwise empty stage.

“We just finished our season this afternoon,” said Mr. Colon Lespier. “We put on a musical revue for senior citizens. A few standards, some Latin music, some Rafaél Hernández.”

It was the kind of program that Mr. Aguado liked — giving some of the borough’s older residents the kind of music that they had cherished from their youth. A few times, he noted, he even brought the music of Hernández, Puerto Rico’s most famous composer, to spots in Riverdale or Kingsbridge more used to klezmer or Celtic.

“The one thing about Bill and the B.C.A. is that it’s like being at art school,” Mr. Colon Lespier said. “He takes all these folks to school and they learn about the importance of art for a community. Some get it quickly. Some are slow learners. But eventually they get it.”

Mr. Aguado corrected him slightly: “Or they say yes, so I’ll keep my mouth shut.” ■