A past priest, psychotherapist, and show-biz whiz kid utilizes his array of experiences to guide Brandeis’s museum through its next transformation.

BY THERESA PEASE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE LOVETT
The Rose Art Museum’s director looks familiar, you might have encountered him at the Yale Art Gallery when he worked as critic for the New Haven Register or seen his photo on the jacket of a book about new media. Perhaps you spotted him jumping over a new Toyota, eyed him as a potential killer on TV’s Law and Order, or heard him render Stephen Sondheim’s deliciously cynical lyrics in an off-Broadway revue. Then again, he could have treated you for emotional distress—or even absolved you of your sins.

Michael Rush, who was named Henry and Lois Foster Director of the Rose in December 2005, is no dilettante, because dilettantes skim the surface. Rush goes deep.

When the entertainment Jones first tickled him as a teen in Chatham, New Jersey, forty-five minutes from Broadway, he didn’t hook up with other kids and do a skit; he got himself cast in the title role in Hamlet. Before high school graduation, he had followed his sister, noted actress Deborah Rush, onto the professional stage. When he decided at age eighteen to pursue a clerical vocation, Rush bypassed the order of diocesan priests who taught him at Seton Hall University, where he earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

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Prep and went to the Jesuits—literally, the Society of Jesus, known for their unblemished idealism, intellectual breadth and rigor, and forcefulness within the power structure of the Catholic Church. He lived within the exacting demands of the Jesuit community for fifteen years, initially studying philosophy, drama, and Spanish at St. Louis University, where he earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees. He not only was tapped for the order of diocesan priests who taught him at Seton Hall Prep and went to the Jesuits—literally, the Society of Jesus, known for their unblemished idealism, intellectual breadth and rigor, and forcefulness within the power structure of the Catholic Church. He lived within the exacting demands of the Jesuit community for fifteen years, initially studying philosophy, drama, and Spanish at St. Louis University, where he earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees. When he decided to explore acting as a child, it was Shakespeare and the tormented Prince of Denmark that beckoned to him. When he felt the call of the cloth, he was attracted to the heavy-duty Jesuit community and to what he calls “mysticism and other extreme religious experience.” When he added Doctor to the title of Father, he found his niche in schizophrenia and other dark corners of the human psyche. When he returned to the stage, it was experimental, cutting-edge theater that ignited his passion. And when the visual arts world opened its doors to draw him in, it was modern and contemporary art. During Rush’s Palm Beach tenure, the institution’s rapid growth and edgy, contemporary program in a community that was not used to it.”

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In 2000, Rush was primed for another change—“they seem to happen in fifteen-year cycles,” he comments—when he was called on to review a multimedia artist asked him to help prepare text for a brochure accompanying their exhibition. His booklet caught the eye of the New Haven Register, which offered him a position as art critic. Though not formally educated in the fine arts, Rush says it’s not an unusual scenario: Many an art critic learned the craft by applying already well-honed creative sensibilities to researching and writing about art. With each assignment, he immersed himself in learning about new movement, exhibition, artist, or period. He began penning art pieces for Art New England, the New York Times, and Art in America and soon wrote his first book on art. His titles include New Media in Late Twentieth-Century Art (1999), Video Art (2003), and New Media in Art (2005).

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“We showed people things they had never seen before,” he says, “and I took great pains to educate them about the exhibitions. Artists were always speaking there, and we would frequently offer panel discussions with artists and collectors. Florida critics and art writers were not particularly attuned to contemporary art, but they were very open. We engaged them in the process, and people began to pay a lot of attention to us, nationally and locally. By and large, it was a sweet experience to create a genuinely edgy, contemporary program in a community that was not used to it.”

By the end of four years, the museum had an annual attendance of about eleven thousand visitors—slightly below the traffic level Brandeis records each year at the Rose. Despite the institution’s rapid growth and

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If the career path that led Rush to the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art was an unusual one, so were the opportunities and challenges before him.

“I pretty much had carte blanche,” recalls Rush, who signed on as both director and chief curator at the nascent museum. Analogous to the roles of director and producer to the theater, the curator has specific creative responsibility for managing and presenting the collection or exhibition, while the director oversees the entire operation, including creative, business, public relations, education, publication, and management functions of the institution. In a short time, Rush developed a hefty following for the museum, which emerged in a community that had been hungry for culture but largely unfamiliar with contemporary art. During Rush’s Palm Beach tenure, the New York
positive presence in Palm Beach, though, the museum closed its doors in 2004 after its major funder withdrew support. Rush returned to New York to rejoin his longtime domestic partner, theatrical director Bill Castellino, and continue his writing career.

RUSH TO THE ROSE

In October 2005, Brandeis announced that Rush would be joining the Rose Art Museum as director that December, replacing Joseph Ketner II, who had resigned the previous spring to become chief curator of the Milwaukee Art Museum. In introducing Rush to the community, Provost Marty Wyngaarden Krauss, PhD '81, called him "a visionary and innovative leader who will bring the Rose to the next level of excellence." Professor of Fine Arts Nancy Scott, who had served on the director search committee, lauded his "multifaceted intellectual formation," and Gerald Fineberg, chairman of the museum's board of overseers, said, "He is a very respected fellow and highly knowledgeable about contemporary art." Search committee member Lois Foster, chair of the overseers for more than a decade, declared, "I think he has everything you would want in a director."

With reciprocal enthusiasm, Rush embraced the leadership of the Rose as a kind of dream job. "I was interested in finding a university situation. My whole life had been about interdisciplinary thinking, so the idea of having multiple departments to both draw on and feed into in an intellectual environment was enormously appealing to me," he says.

Indeed, the situation awaiting him in Waltham could hardly have been more different from Palm Beach. Instead of being tasked to create a museum—collection, programming, fundraising, audience, and support network—from scratch, Rush was being handed the keys to a thriving institution. He'd like to see the day when, just as voyagers to Italy wouldn't think twice about visiting Florence without eyeing the Botticellis in the Uffizi, he could hardly wait to get his hands on a treasure trove of art that would be his to curate, exhibit, study, build upon, and love.

Further, given his taste for modern art (work from roughly the turn of the twentieth century through the 1960s and contemporary art (creative products of the late 1960s to the present), he could hardly have found a more amenable host. Spanning the nineteenth century and当前的20th-21st century, the Rose is rich with works by the likes of Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Morris Louis, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, and Andy Warhol. Also represented in the collection are Willem de Kooning, Wassily Kandinsky, Philip Guston, and emerging international artists whose presence bespeaks a canny collecting policy on the part of the Rose's earlier donors and curators. Of some six thousand works in the permanent collection, Rush deems at least one hundred to be iconic in status—that is, easily recognizable to and beloved by connoisseurs.

"Everyone in the art world knows about the Brandeis collection. It's the gem of modern and contemporary art in New England and one of the great gems of university art collections in the nation," says Rush, who estimates the value of the Brandeis collection in the hundreds of millions.

A DREAM AMPLIFIED

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In the architects' vision, the new exhibition space and a dedicated education wing would nearly double the size of the museum to almost 34,000 square feet. On display in the Rose is a model of the building design by architect Shigeru Ban, designated by Time magazine as likely to become one of the most innovative projects of the twenty-first century, and his associate, Dean Maltz.

In the architects' vision, the new exhibition space and a dedicated education suite will incorporate and rise above the original museum and its 2001 addition, the Lois Fester Wing. A 1974 addition comprising the largely the lower level of the current facility will be reconfigured as office and much-needed storage space. When the design was unveiled in 2004, the building's program was tagged at $8 million. Rush says, but with inflation the estimated cost of the project has climbed to $15 million. Thus far, Brandeis has raised some $3.5 million for the project, scheduled for completion in 2008. The total includes a generous lead gift from Fineberg.

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Just because the Rose was neither a new museum in need of shaping, nor a broken one in need of fixing, doesn't mean Rush didn't have work cut out for him. While the museum's chief curator, Raphaela Platow, had been doing an admirable job as acting director during the search, Rush brought with him the clear eye of a newcomer to discern the tasks ahead—to dream, as it were, a new dream for the Rose.

The dream is multifaceted, perhaps visionary, and by any account ambitious. It starts with the collection and expands throughout the physical plant, staffing, education programs, philosophy, and administration of the institution. Since its threads are closely intertwined and interdependent, it's hard to tease out an unraveled timetable for the work at hand and ahead. Some aspects:

* Adding Value: While the Rose blooms in a milieu highly committed to the arts, Rush is part of a larger university, and has creative neighbors like the Spingold Theater Center and Slosberg Hall, home of Brandeis's music program, Rush is not convinced the community fully grasps the splendid value and quality of its holdings. With key members of the arts community, Rush reckoned by "eyeball," he says, that the works in hand are worth at least $300 million. Rather than operating on an educator's budget, though, he has engaged Christie's Fine Art Auctioneers of New York to do a formal evaluation. He admits the move is less for insurance purposes than it is to demonstrate to Brandeis the value of its artworks. At the same time, he has begun work on an online catalog to provide closer control and access to the museum's holdings. "I'm confident," he says, "that if you ask the president, 'where is the university's largest financial asset, and I want everyone to know it.'"

* Spotlighting the Collection: Beyond securing proper recognition for the Rose collection on its own home turf, Rush aims to proclaim its importance to a wider audience. While the museum is already known far and wide as a place where wondrous things exist in storage, Rush has a larger ambition. He wants to make the Rose a destination for travelers. He'd like to see the day when, just as italy travelers wouldn't think twice about visiting Florence without eyeing the Botticellis in the Uffizi Gallery, a Boston visit will be unthinkable without a drive to Waltham to view the Walthers at the Rose. To make the collection fully accessible, though, Rush has to do more to store and retrieve systems and
most of all, get more works out of storage and into the galleries. With that in mind, he asked the architects to reconfigure a quantity of new space in the expanded facility not as a gallery for temporary exhibits, but as a place where the Rose’s most significant works can predictably be seen. In the short term, though, Rush began 2007 by mounting an exhibition called RoseArt: Works from the Permanent Collection. The show continues through April 1.

Developing the collection. While creating proper reverence for the works already in hand, Rush would like to escalate the museum’s acquisitions program to fill in some blanks. This means defining a purchase policy in view of some philosophical questions. For example, should the museum spend the annual income from its Rose and Hayes Justice Louis D. Brandeis, was presented to the Rose last fall by New York art dealer Ronald Feldman and his family. Part of a Warhol series on influential Jews, the piece was officially unveiled during the November 15 celebration of Louis Brandeis’s 150th birthday. Rush is hoping donors will help the institution to build upon its strengths by augmenting the quantity of works by artists already in the Rose’s catalog—artists like Rosenspire, Johns, and Josef Albers. Also on what Rush calls his “wish list” for future acquisitions are works by Bruce Nauman, Ann Hamilton, and other contemporary artists.

Populating the art community. The art world is perhaps uniquely exempted from the old adage “paper is cheap, people are expensive”; the Rose’s works on paper are plenty dear. Still, Rush attaches high value to the reuse of the museum’s scholarly kalediostam to position the museum as a center of intellec- tual activity.

Knocking down disciplinary fences. Among the most inspirational of Rush’s ambitions is one that putting taking advantage of Brandeis’s scholarly kalediostam to position the museum as a center of intellec- tual activity.

Sometimes you look at modern art, and sometimes you enter into it. Here, a visitor to the Rose steps inside an environment to sample artist John Armleder’s Collection. The show continues through April 1.

Developing the collection. New directors use the verb “profes- sionalize” at their own political risk. Rush says he does not mean to diminish the efforts and achievements of either his predecessors or his existing staff when he talks about professionalizing the museum’s administration. Rather, he is seeking access to the inner circle of art institutions by applying for professional accreditation through the American Association of Museums. The organization cofdies ethics, disseminates “best practice” standards for museum operations and planning, shares knowledge, and provides advocacy on issues of concern to the entire museum community. Reflecting on another benefit of accreditation, he notes, “The process of certification is such a detailed one, involving such rigorous self-analysis and outside analysis, that it’s extremely helpful for an institution to go through it.”

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I WANT THIS PLACE TO BE A HUB; I WANT THE TRIBUTARIES TO BE MANY AND TO FLOW VERY RAPIDLY THROUGHOUT THE CAMPUS. Purchase Fund endowment on fewer, greater works, or allot less money per item to buy numerous works of more modest value? It also means trying to ratchet up the gifts of artwork to the institution. While creating proper reverence for the works already in hand, Rush would like to escalate the museum’s acquisitions program to fill in some blanks. This means defining a purchase policy in view of some philosophical questions. For example, should the museum spend the annual income from its Rose and Hayes

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Putting it on paper. Another massive undertaking in the works at the Rose is the publication of the museum’s first comprehensive catalog, due to be released by New York art publisher Harry N. Abrams Inc. in 2009. Raphaela Platow is organizing the megaproject, a team effort by the Rose’s curatorial staff—or, as Rush describes it, “a full-court press.” Partial financial support for the endeavor has been provided by donor Michael Rush ’77, PhD ’81. Publishing a catalog, Rush says, involves gaining intimate knowledge of the collection, photographing the collection, organizing the material, and assembling a cadre of writers to prepare essays about individual items in the collection.

One of the biggest challenges,” Rush says, “is figuring out how to present the information in a way that not only is interesting but also depicts the collection accurately. It involves capturing the museum’s spirit and putting out its story as you go. There are probably a thou- sand decisions to be made, a thousand corners to be turned.”

In that case, the catalog project should be a success; turning corners, after all, is Rush’s specialty.

Theresa Buzz is the editor of Brandeis University Magazine.