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No Invitation Required

Guest Commentary -

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In a town with a different festival nearly every weekend, it is often difficult to get excited about one in particular - and harder still to amass the stamina necessary to continue attending them week after week. It's even more challenging when dealing with a festival that has no beer, no wine, no food, no music - in fact, nothing tangible at all.

As the city of Aspen quiets, still reeling from three straight weeks of booze, fine cuisine, wine and music, it also prepares to host what can certainly be considered the most intelligent festival of the summer: the 2nd Annual Aspen Ideas Fest at the Aspen Institute.

The festival is hard to pin down. It's not bombastic and overwhelming like The Food & Wine Magazine Classic, and it definitely doesn't draw hordes of locals, like Jazz Aspen Snowmass. It is a little festival that quietly assembles some of the biggest names in, well everything. As Elliot Gerson, the executive vice president in charge of seminars for the Institute puts it, at any one moment, the festival might deal with "Shakespeare or Darfur, the future of the universe, or the future of the species, energy or terrorism, America or Africa, politics or poetry, medicine or the media."

In short, it is a festival about everything, and the institute has assembled some of the biggest minds on the planet including President Bill Clinton, former Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer and former Secretary of State Madeline Albright. This is a field of experts that is unmatched at almost any festival in the world, and seems well qualified to discuss everything.

The festival takes place from July 3-9, during which time there will be no lectures, no vast arenas and no massive auditoriums. Each session is kept small - a seminar room, a cozy discussion, breakfast at the Maroon Bells. The intimate nature, combined with the caliber of invited guests, makes this an opportunity for those with tickets to interact with the world's decision makers not just by listening to a talk, but through an equal exchange of ideas. The goal is to "get people together in discourse about important issues that can make a difference in the world," says Gerson.

This festival represents a rare opportunity for anyone to participate in what would ordinarily be a closed-doors summit, which is what the Institute specializes in for the other eleven months of the year. While most meetings at this level are invitation-only affairs, the Aspen Ideas Festival differs by inviting eminent minds, then opening up admission to anyone wishing to attend. The goal of the festival is to allow the common man to contribute to the world of ideas usually dominated by experts.

Unfortunately, despite the institute's efforts to make Ideas Fest an accessible public event, there is little chance at this point of fully participating in the utopian exchange of ideas. Tickets have been sold out since January, and even if you could get your hands on some, they would run you \$1800 each. So absent a miracle, most of the common men, at least here in the valley, will be stuck on the outside, hoping to catch a glimpse of greatness eating a slice at New York Pizza or arguing the merits of American foreign policy while waiting for a table at Jimmy's. It is this fact that has kept this festival largely obscure to most in the valley, even as it assembles some of the greatest minds alive today.

But those running the festival refuse to only serve the monetary elite.

"We are trying to find ways to reach as broad an audience as possible," says Gerson. "We have opened up many of the events to the Roaring Fork Valley community."

In fact, 25 events, ranging from discussions on space, time and reality, to the relevance of classical theater, are being offered to the public - and tickets are still available. The highlight of these offerings is called "An Afternoon of Conversation," held on July 6 in the Music Tent. There, \$75 buys you five and a half hours of intellectual stimulation with such eminent names as Sandra Day O'Connor, Alan Greenspan, Andrea Mitchell and Sydney Pollock, just to name a few.

Beyond access to the larger names, the public events also provide a golden opportunity for residents of the valley to meet and interact with some lesser

known, but no less influential individuals.

"Last year many of the comments that we got were that some of the best events were with people no one had ever heard of", says Gerson.

For example, this year \$30 will buy you breakfast with Howard Gardner, one of the leading experts on cognition and education - a breakfast that would ordinarily cost you \$40,000 in Harvard tuition. Fifteen dollars will grant you audience with Michael Kahn, artistic director of the Shakespeare Theater Company, a company the Wall Street Journal has called "the foremost in the world."

Gerson also notes that the sheer number of featured guests and their participation in public and private events will add another unlikely dimension to each of these public presentations - the presence of great minds in the audience. "Some of the most exciting moments last year were actually questions asked by speakers, of other speakers," recalls Gerson. And aside from hearing the views of the presenting speaker, attendance at any of the festival's events could afford a front row seat to high-level intellectual debate or, put bluntly, a really good fight between really smart people. In addition to just generating ideas, the festival's goal is to facilitate change along the lines of those ideas. Modeled somewhat after the Aspen Goethe festival of 1949, which helped define Aspen's current intellectual identity, this modern festival seeks to expand on that model by actually amassing people who are willing to effect change.

"You will see in each of the programs we do here an element that indicates to people how they can stay engaged and what they can do about each problem," says Gerson. It comes as a response, he says, to the nagging criticism sometimes leveled at academia that they're all brain and no action. Gerson hopes that the uniqueness of this festival will silence those critics, and allow for positive change. The slant of the conference combined with over twenty five public forums will afford everyone in the valley the extraordinary opportunity to see for themselves and, if they wish, to participate in that change first hand.

Most events are open to pass-holding guests only and take place on the campus of the Aspen Institute. All twenty-five public events will be held in Aspen, with most in venues downtown. Tickets for the public events are available through the Aspen Music Festival and School Gondola Box Office, at the Wheeler Box office or at Harris Hall. For more information and complete listings of events visit www.aspeninstitute.org/ideasfest.

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