

Rancho Mirage Writers Fest stimulates smart dialogues

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Published 4:26 p.m. PT Jan. 25, 2016 | Updated 10:51 p.m. PT Jan. 25, 2016

You knew when the overflow room of the Annenberg Center overflowed Thursday night that the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival had taken another paradigm leap.

I stood against a wall in the lobby of that Eisenhower Medical Center facility watching author A. Scott Berg on a television monitor amid a crowd of literary cognoscenti. He talked about Charles Lindbergh becoming the first international paparazzi star by becoming the first pilot to fly across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927. Then he became the first media star to become a victim of his fame when his baby son was kidnapped and murdered five years later.

The festival closed Saturday night when humorist Dave Barry gave another sold-out talk in that facility and asked the question all of us sardines were wondering:

“What, you couldn’t get a funeral home?”

Jamie Kabler, who led this third annual festival as if he had abandoned his fabled Hollywood Diet and gone on a 72-hour sugar high, heard multiple testimonials from fans and authors that this festival had elevated to a new level of excellence. There were facts and figures attesting to its growth.

Ticket sales grew by 25 percent to 1,080 people. That equates to almost 3,300 total attendance by the most conservative estimates. If you had used film festival methods of counting every event that filled the 485-seat Helene Galen Auditorium in the Annenberg Center, the 400-seat Steinbeck Room of the Rancho Mirage Library and the two smaller library rooms, you'd have an exponentially higher number.

Just as significantly, the budget grew from \$300,000 to \$750,000 by increasing the number of donors of \$5,000 each from 34 in 2015 to 120. That allowed Kabler to book literary giants such as Berg, Andrew Roberts (author of “Napoleon: A Life”), novelist Lee Child (of the Jack Reacher mysteries), California Poet Laureate Dana Gioia, and Ronald Reagan biographer H.W. Brands.

Participating in one panel was former California Gov. Gray Davis. Attending all three days was former California Treasurer Kathleen Brown, sister of Davis’ former boss, current Gov. Jerry Brown.

Davis said Brown taught him, “There is no constituency for the future,” which he learned after being recalled during an electricity crisis in 2003. He had built a reputation as an education advocate.

I got to lead a conversation finding common ground between humorist Barry and New York Times “Your Money” columnist Ron Lieber. Lieber’s first book suggested students take time off before college to avoid paying tuition for years spent drinking, staying out late and sleeping through class. Barry said he spent his academic years drinking and staying out late, but that apparently provided research for his latest book, “Live Right and Find Happiness (Although Beer Is Much Faster).”

I think my favorite panel was, “What Makes A President Great?” featuring Davis, Brands, Watergate-era broadcast journalist, Marvin Kalb, national political columnist Matt Bai, and Lieber’s wife, New York Times correspondent Jodi Kantor.

Kalb, his voice as strong at 85 as when Edward Murrow selected him for his legendary CBS team, suggested, “We may no longer be able to have a great president.” Bai expanded on that, saying “something structural is going on that goes to Marvin’s point.” Brand added that political parties may not decide the primaries anymore.

I wish Roberts had been on that panel. Academics have seriously compared Donald Trump to Napoleon in his quest to achieve national greatness and Roberts, who opened the festival with a talk on his latest tome, “The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War II,” might have been able to lend perspective to Kalb’s question, “What constitutes greatness?”

Napoleon is often compared to Hitler by our British-influenced society, but Roberts said of Napoleon, “This man was the enlightenment on horseback. He was not a monster.” Roberts wrote that Napoleon used brutal, terrorist actions to scare his enemies into submission, but said Friday he assembled 46 legal codes into one book that the average Frenchman could understand. “This man was a creator,” Roberts said. “He was a builder.”

Roberts did participate in a panel with Israeli columnist Ari Shavit and Wall Street Journal columnist Bret Stephens that was Helene Galen’s favorite talk. It was on “The Modern Swastika: The Rise of Terrorism and Anti-Semitism in Europe.”

“Everybody was agreeing with it so obviously it was very emotional,” Galen said. “When you’re Jewish, you live with this all of your life and you don’t want to hear about it continuing and growing and it is all over the world and it’s just so shocking.”

“What they said,” added Kabler, “is today they use the word anti-Israel, but they’re substituting Israel for being anti-Semitic.

“But another terrible thing is what’s happening in our schools in America,” Galen said. “This is what they were talking about. It’s so frightening to see it coming back into our high schools and our colleges.”

Not all of the talks were engaging. Sally Denton, an investigative journalist who has written about a Kentucky drug conspiracy, organized crime in Las Vegas and corruption in the Mormon Church, read a speech she wrote on her latest book on the Bechtel family, “The Profiteers: Bechtel & the Men Who Built the World.” She was one of the few authors I saw who didn’t make her written words more entertaining with good public speaking skills.

But this festival is finding its identity as an event that makes you think. It features authors of fiction and humor, but its focus is on non-fiction and, like the Palm Springs International Film Festival that precedes it in early January, it uses the intelligence of its mostly senior audience to inspire its speakers to raise the quality of their conversation instead of dumb it down for the uninformed.

Kabler is now negotiating with a Rancho Mirage hotel that would add a 1,200-capacity ballroom to next year’s festival. He’s hoping to add a couple celebrity authors and a medical researcher who can discuss the progress on efforts to cure cancer.

I just hope they can use that venue next year for Sunday presentations so more young and working people can have an opportunity to attend this stimulating addition to our social calendar.

Cultural tourism factor

The Rancho Mirage Writers Festival generated 100 reservations at the Omni Hotel and 20 at the Ritz-Carlton in Rancho Mirage, said Kabler. That doesn’t make it a tourism force. But Aftab Dada, chairman of the P.S. Resorts and general manager of the Palm Springs Hilton Hotel, says the nationally-televised Career Builders Golf Tournament doesn’t draw tourists to Palm Springs, either.

“We don’t get any room nights from Career Builders – none,” Dada said Friday. “We never used to get anything from Bob Hope (Classic), either. The only thing we do get from Career Builders and Bob Hope is compression. But the last four or five years they haven’t been able to attract (many) big-time golfers. If you go on Expedia now, everyone down valley has got rooms for this weekend.”

Tour de Palm Springs filled west valley hotel rooms last weekend, said Dada, and this weekend will be full, too. But it won’t be because of the valley’s big cultural tourism event, the Southwest Arts Festival in Indio. Far from it.

“January historically is a soft month,” Dada said. “The only reason we are busy the last weekend of January is because we have about 20,000 girls, which is a cheerleading group. We have a cheerleading group every year that comes in from all over the country and over 20,000 girls will pack every single restaurant. Every single room in town has been taken.”

That’s almost as many girls as we get for Dinah Week or as many guys as we get for White Party Week. Maybe we should dub this Pom Pom Week.