

Writers fest newest big event on busy calendar

PalmSprings

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Rancho Mirage Librarian David Bryant calls the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival "an intellectual village." But for its spearhead and co-founder Jamie Kabler, it's Disneyland.

You know it's high season when you've been to five author talks, two plays, two classical concerts and one hip-hop show in a week, and you feel bad you missed the Humana Challenge.

But here's how my week went:

The Rancho Mirage Writers Festival: A new star in our galaxy of special events was born when more than 800 members of an endangered species known as book readers filled the Annenberg Center at Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage, the Helene Galen Theater at Rancho Mirage High School, and a space between bookshelves at the Rancho Mirage Public Library.

Most amazingly, 500 tickets have been sold for next year's writers fest and the donors have grown from six angels at last year's launch to 50 for 2016.

When festival spearhead Jamie Kabler said the festival would outdo itself next year, Mayor Pro Tem Dana Hobart said, "I don't believe it, but I wouldn't bet against it."

More remarkable than the attendance for the four-day festival is the quality of the audience. One author said the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books in April is bigger and more prestigious, but it's like a family pop festival. Parents bring their kids to see a dinosaur exhibit. There's music, photo galleries, cooking demonstrations and film screenings. So people just walk past the author talks. At Rancho Mirage, she said, people actually listen and ask intelligent questions.

That's no surprise since the Palm Springs International Film Festival is nationally known for its intelligent Q&As. But this festival had truly weighty conversations. Eric Lichtblau spoke on how thousands of Nazis settled in the United States with impunity after World War II. Jonathan Darman compared and contrasted presidents Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan.

So many people had questions for Jeff Chang about his book, "Who We Be: The Colorization of America," I didn't get to ask a single one. And I was supposed to be the moderator.

"Who We Be" is an important book about the "culture wars" happening right now in this country. So I asked him after his Q&A why the second most-talked-about black man in America is Bill Cosby and why isn't anyone exposing old white showbiz powers who coerced women into sex acts by threatening their careers and drugging them with Quaaludes?

I mentioned a quote I recently cited from Lucille Ball that "women were raped the minute they got off the train" in Hollywood in the 1930s. Quaaludes were commonly used as an "aphrodisiac" in the 1970s. So I asked Chang, is race and Cosby's image as a Dr. Huxtable-type role model why we're only talking about the rape accusations against him?

"I'm happy the issue's raised," he replied. "I'm a little concerned that this has been going on for years and that when you can then attach a black man to it, suddenly it's something that rises to the level of being addressed. That does concern me for sure."

The festival concluded with a powerful one-man play about Ernest Hemingway by actor-writer Laurence Luckinbill, and an engaging talk by "Interview With A Vampire" author Anne Rice, her son, novelist Christopher Rice, and her longtime editor-turned Barbara Stanwyck biographer Victoria Wilson about the creative process and the big changes in the publishing business.

Kabler says next January's festival will run through the weekend to enable more young people to join the conversation. Order tickets now at (760) 341-7323.