



Dramatic Art

In a plot twist right out of a soap opera, MARIA ARENA BELL arrived just in time to save L.A.'s MOCA by SAMANTHA DUNN

So, here's the pitch: Our heroine is a soap-opera writer with California-girl good looks, who doubles as a maven in the high-art world. By day, she has to keep a TV show

atop the ratings so it won't die by cancellation like so many other shows of its ilk. By night, she must raise millions for a world-famous modern-art museum or it will

(cue ominous music) close its doors. What...will...happen?

Oh, puh-leese. Sounds about as plausible as the *Hannah Montana* concept, right? But if anyone can make this

plot line work, it's Maria Arena Bell, Daytime Emmy-winning show runner on *The Young and the Restless*.

Bell, head writer and exec producer of the genre's top performer—the woman *TV Guide* called a soap-opera savior—has been responsible for raising, by her own estimation, more than \$50 million for arts nonprofits. She chairs the National Arts Awards and serves as president for P.S. ARTS, which provides art classes to California elementary school kids.

And then there's the Museum of Contemporary Art. Bell joined its board in 2008, just in time for MOCA to face an epic funding crisis that threatened to shut its doors.

Sitting on the couch in her sun-hued CBS office filled with comfy pillows, Bell shakes her head. "I couldn't have come in at a worse time, frankly. I joined at [former MOCA director] Jeremy Strick's insistence—okay, he begged me—but I didn't really want to, because taking up another board was a huge commitment. As a state commissioner on the Commission on the Status of Women, I was going up to Sacramento all the time. And because TV ratings were going up here, they wanted me to stay...and then there were my kids!"

As she says all this, Bell, mother of two teenagers, somehow comes off as more soccer mom than hoity-toity art socialite. "And then the crisis hit. I kind of said, 'Look, I just joined the board—who am I to decide the fate of this museum? I am so new.' In fact, in December of that year, a major insider came up to me and said, 'Look, you better resign right now. You just joined, you don't need to

inherit this thing—it is not your problem.’ So, I drafted a letter of resignation. It sat and sat right on my desk. I couldn’t send it. I realized I didn’t want to leave. I believed there needed to be a MOCA—I just wasn’t sure how that would happen.”

But it did. In organizing one of the most successful charity galas in the museum’s history and championing new director Jeffrey Deitch after Strick resigned, Bell helped steer a new course for its success. “She deserves credit for the turnaround,” says Eli Broad, the influential arts patron whose \$30 million gift to MOCA kept it afloat as it reorganized.

The famously taciturn philanthropist is effusive in his praise: “She’s very bright, energetic, accomplished and professional. She’s turned around our galas and recruited a number of good trustees, including the current director. And she does all this while having a full-time posi-

tion at CBS. I can’t say anything but good things about her.”

At this point in our story, we need to understand character motivation—as in, why would anybody in her right mind work six days a week and juggle big egos, big pocketbooks and the potential for high-profile failure—and we don’t mean her day job. It’s a backstory that involves books, a guy named Fabian Giroux and a head sticking out of a banquet table.

A child of divorce raised by her grandparents in Newport Beach, Bell learned that the arts offered escape into her own private world. “I was a voracious reader. I’d stay up with a flashlight under the covers. I read *The Great Gatsby* in third grade—I don’t know I understood it, but I read it!” she says with a bright laugh. Part of her appeal is she’s most often the brunt of her own jokes. “I would watch those black-and-white movies and wanted to learn

everything—who were those people? What were they about? I wanted to be a writer, but I had no idea how to go about that.”

Then as a sophomore at Newport Harbor High School, she walked into her AP art-history class. “My teacher, Fabian Giroux, gave me this deep love of art and opened up that world for me. In fact, to this day I still hear his voice in my head. Like, he always said, ‘The Impressionists—*schlock*, just *schlock*!’ And I have to admit that years later when I was viewing a Renoir exhibit, I was thinking, *Hmm, yeah, kind of schlocky.*”

Thanks to Giroux’s influence, Bell went on to major in art history and creative writing at Northwestern University, which, in another twist of fate, eventually led to her finding a job writing for *The Bold and the Beautiful*, created by her future father-in-law, William Bell. Today, she and husband Bill Bell have become collectors of Andy

Warhol, Jeff Koons and other contemporary artists.

“We’ve been together since 1988, and art has been a unifying thing in our marriage. I dragged him to museums and the Warhol exhibition at MoMA right after Andy died, and it was a turning point in his life. Now it’s not just, ‘Some of our best friends are artists’ because some of our best friends really *are* artists.” Indeed, it’s hard not to notice that when she mentions her friend Jeff, she means Koons or that Damien is British bad boy Hirst.

She’s not afraid to say their kids, Liam and Sabrina, haven’t always been wild about art. “We travel to exhibitions and drag our children along. There have been times when they’re rolling their eyes and saying, ‘In 15 minutes we have to leave!’”

Then there are the once-in-a-lifetime experiences afforded by their parents’ patronage of the arts, like getting to make a spin

Hair: Alessandra Saman Makeup: Mark Payne

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painting with Hirst in his studio. “Damien is like a rock star and was just, ‘C’mon!’ I think it hit them that this isn’t so bad.”

And during MOCA’s last gala showcasing iconic performance artist Marina Abramović, guests had to don white lab coats and sit at banquet tables where the heads of live models protruded from the center. Sabrina told her mother afterward what a profound experience she had with her head. “She kept saying, ‘Mom, I know this sounds weird, but when I was looking at her, it really felt like she loved me.’” Later, Bell heard one model talking about a young girl she connected with and how she felt this rush of love for her. She was amazed when she realized the model was speaking of Sabrina.

For Bell, it brought home why she puts so much time into this. “The reason I love the MOCA gala—and all the events I’m involved with—is it messages what the organization is about. This isn’t just another black-tie, rubber-chicken-dinner. The idea of that gala is what the arts can bring to people. It’s not about being an artist or even being a patron of artists—it’s just about what makes us human. It is the thing that outlives us all.” Bell leans forward and speaks passionately, perhaps once again hearing the voice of her high school art-history teacher.

On the other hand, seeing Sabrina’s experience at the gala from her own perspective as the organizer can mean only one thing for Bell: How do we top that? “We’ll see,” she says somewhat cryptically. “We are already thinking about who’s going to be the artist next year. Certainly in terms of reputation, the heat is on, because that thing became so huge. I mean, I never saw so much coverage about anything we’ve done, let alone what was really just a charity event. I think more artists are going to be intrigued to want to push the envelope.

Donors will know they are in for an experience, like it or not. And they have to be ready. Now, the bar keeps getting higher.”

That’s not to say Bell thinks art belongs to a privileged few; in fact, that’s the furthest thing from her belief. She’s written storylines about the art world into *Y&R* and has convinced more than a few curators that a character is based on them. Artists have appeared as themselves, and works by her friend Hirst and Shepard Fairey have even graced the sets.

“It’s okay for art to be fun,” she says. “We don’t have to take ourselves so seriously. I feel like everything I have done, in a weird way, is all linked together. It’s all my story, and that’s why I do what I do. For me, the arts—and that includes writing—are the things that give you solace, give you happiness and make you who you are. Everybody should have them.”

Bell doesn’t anticipate the end of her commitment to MOCA. She’d like to see the museum grounded to the point where a crisis like the one in ’08 would be unthinkable. How will that happen? Stay tuned.

SAMANTHA DUNN *has authored several books, including the just released novel Failing Paris. She enjoys watching telenovelas to practice her Spanish.*

PUZZLE SOLUTION

D	I	A	L	B	R	I	A	N	Q	U	I	Z
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J	E	S	T		C	A	P	R	I		A	R
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T	E	X	T		S	E	A	L	S		E	A

Explanation: “Beginnings,” as hinted in the puzzle’s title, are the key to this month’s answer. The initial letters of the words in the four theme answers, read in order, spell TWENTY TWELVE.

W I N T E R S A L E

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