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Diamonds in Bronze

By Todd Allan Yasui
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In the soul of every man lies a boy who wants to be a baseball player. Some continue the fantasy into middle age, sweating on weekends and splitting seams in their pants in overly serious softball games. Others play bar stool manager, chattering at large-screen TVs, forever second-guessing the choice of relief pitchers and pinch hitters in crucial ninth-inning moments.

But John Dreyfuss has found another way to live his Louisville Slugger dreams: He creates monuments to the game itself. Big, sleek figures of bronze—a pitcher peering out from under his visor, surveying his opponent, ready to start his motion. A batter, straight-backed in cool defiance of the sphere ready to be hurled at him. A catcher, in his dutiful crouch. And finally, the umpire, perhaps the most tense of them all, waiting to make a call with the highest of consequences.

One of Dreyfuss's creations is called "Full Count," in which four Boys of Summer are playing on an imaginary diamond in the garden behind the Federal Reserve Board, on Virginia Avenue between 20th and 21st streets NW. It was installed late last month and will remain on view for the next nine months.

"I wanted to do something that was about the human figure, about an experience I had lived through and knew something about and something that was intensely American," says Dreyfuss, who grew up in Washington watching the Senators play at Griffith Stadium and, later, RFK Stadium. "And these baseball figures seemed to carry some or a great deal of all those aspects of what I wanted to do."

"America treats baseball as a way to bind ourselves together emotionally. For many people, especially myself, you begin to see baseball as a forum in which we talk about and deal with and solve some of our most complex social issues," he says.

A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's school of architecture, Dreyfuss is known in artistic circles for his highly stylized animal figures. But baseball was a topic that kept coming back to him since he started sketches for "Full Count" in 1978.

The project was put on a back burner for several years, but in 1988, after his scale models of the pitcher and catcher received high praise in a Smithsonian traveling exhibition called "Diamonds Are Forever: Artists and Writers on Baseball," he decided to make large-scale bronze castings. Last year, castings

of his pitcher and catcher were chosen by the Arts in Embassies Program to be displayed at the American Embassy in Japan.

When he was first approached about displaying "Full Count" at the Federal Reserve, he didn't have any dream of fields—he thought the piece was to be installed "at a beautiful interior space. When I was told that it was going to be outdoors, originally I was fairly upset by it. Once you put your work in the public venue, you have to step back from the work, and if it's damaged or if the weather damages its patina and so forth, you really have to be able to understand that. But what amazed me was that it really comes alive in a public setting. I couldn't be more pleased."

And Dreyfuss is so pleased with the baseball theme that he's got eight more pitchers in the works. "I have eight different poses for the pitcher right now, much more dynamic, aggressive action."

Asked if he ever played organized ball as a youngster, Dreyfuss, who plays on a softball team, hedges slightly. "As I tell most people who ask me that question, every American youth is defined as having played baseball or not having played baseball. So I played my share of it. But the concept of playing catch, even though it's not in a formal setting, is so ingrained in the idea of family. I think it's an important part of our psyche."

And his abilities as an adult? "If no one is listening, excellent," he says with a smile. "If there's anyone I play with around, I do all right."

Kudos

A 21-petard salute to Michael Kahn, artistic director of the Shakespeare Theatre at the Folger, who will receive the first Shakespeare Globe Award from the newly formed Shakespeare Globe Centre of North America. Kahn will receive the award, which is given for "commitment and contribution to the performance of Shakespeare," at a dinner Wednesday in New York. "I'm extremely flattered," said Kahn, who started his Shakespeare career with Joseph Papp in 1966 and who has been at the Folger for five years. "I've devoted a large portion of my life to producing and teaching Shakespeare, so this is very nice."

And a tip of the ten-gallon hat to Wolf Trap for being one of five nominees for Venue of the Year by the Country Music Association. The winner will be announced Saturday at the CMA's Entertainment Expo in Nashville.