



Profile

Rebecca Irvin

Director

The Rolex Awards for Enterprise
The Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative

Rebecca Irvin joined Rolex SA in Geneva in 1993 to head the Rolex Awards for Enterprise, a unique corporate program that supports innovative people and projects in science, exploration, the environment, cultural heritage and technology. Supported by a staff of 15 at the Secretariat in Geneva, Ms. Irvin looks after all aspects of these international awards, including choosing and organizing the Selection Committee, overseeing the team researching the applicants and directing the worldwide publicity – publications, website, advertising, events and media relations – that benefits the Laureates and their ground-breaking work.

In 2001, with the support of Rolex Chief Executive Patrick Heiniger, she set up the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative, a unique philanthropic program in the arts. Ms Irvin and her team also organize and recruit the distinguished artists and advisors who participate in the Rolex Arts Initiative.

Before joining Rolex, Ms Irvin was deputy head of communications at the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva from 1991 to 1993. From 1982 to 1991, she enjoyed a career as a news agency and freelance radio journalist, working for United Press International, Reuters, NBC News and Swiss Radio International in Geneva, London and Lisbon.

A dual American and Swiss national, Ms Irvin graduated from Wheaton College in Illinois in 1981 with a B.A. in political science and modern languages. She earned a Masters in international history and politics from the Graduate Institute of

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The Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative is Rolex's support program for young, emerging artists in six disciplines in the arts: dance, theater, music, literature, film and visual arts. The program's goal is to provide the opportunity for these artists to spend a year with a distinguished or established artist (i.e. "Mentor") in their discipline. Every other year since this program's inception in 2002, a Mentor from each discipline has been appointed by the program's Advisory Board, which consists of internationally renowned artists and professionals. The promising young "Protégés" are identified by members of the six Nominating Panels, one for each discipline, made up of experts in the given field from all over the world. Each panel selects three or four finalists, with the Mentor ultimately selecting his or her Protégé from among these finalists. (See below for further details on this process.)

This program is repeated on a two-year cycle with each Protégé receiving instruction and guidance from the Mentor for a period of one year. To celebrate the completion of each cycle, Rolex hosts a gala, which for the past three cycles has been held in New York City. More than 500 guests from the international artistic community are invited to the gala, including respected and renowned artists, curators, administrators and other arts leaders.. Over dinner, Rolex presents short documentaries of the year's activities and outcome of each Mentor-Protégé pair in the cycle. The following interview was conducted in mid-November, 36 hours after the gala in New York City in mid-November 2007 celebrating the completion of the third cycle.

(Interviewer: Yoko Shioya, Artistic Director of the Japan Society)

I am familiar with the system and philosophy of the Mentor and Protégé program to some degree and what goes on behind the scenes because I myself served as one of the Nominators for the theater discipline of the program two years ago. But I would like to take this opportunity to ask you to give us a general introduction to the program. First of all, what was it that inspired Rolex to undertake a program in support of the arts? And, how did it come to take the form of this Mentor and Protégé program?

The program took about two years to develop, from 1999 through 2001. We also have another philanthropic program in science and the environment called the Rolex Awards for Enterprise. The Mentor and Protégé program grew out of that. Around 1999 we started asking ourselves, "Could we extend the Rolex Awards program to the arts?" Then we quickly came to the conclusion, "No, we can't support the arts in the same way that we fund science and environment projects and still have a meaningful program." I suggested to Patrick Heiniger, the CEO of Rolex, that we should set up a separate program in the arts and we started researching it.

From the beginning we thought it should be international, should be ongoing, should be very diverse, and should address many different art forms. Basically we

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International Studies in Geneva in 1985. More recently, she completed studies in piano with a degree in 1999 at the Popular Music Conservatory in Geneva, alongside her full-time work at Rolex. She is married and has two grown children.

<http://www.rolexmentorprotege.com/en/index.jsp>

talked with a lot of artists and arts leaders to establish what was missing in arts philanthropy. Also, I hired a small arts advocacy firm in New York and had them do some research. This program was a result of a combination of our thinking in Rolex, speaking with people in the arts, having this firm research the market and make some recommendations, and a great deal of brainstorming among experts. So it wasn't one person who had this idea.

The question was, "What can Rolex do in the arts that would be really unique and interesting?" "What could we do that wasn't being done and that was needed?" Young people do not necessarily need money. They need contacts, exposure and funding. Then we came up with the idea that something that could make a real difference in this kind of environment would be to provide young artists with a Mentor who could give them valuable guidance. In 2001, the first Advisory Board met in Geneva. And we officially launched the program and started with the first pairs of Mentors and Protégés in 2002.

When Rolex started this program, did you have any specific image of what the mentorship would be like?

The guidelines that we set up five years ago are pretty much still valid. We made suggestions how the mentoring might take place, but the only thing we said to Mentors, which we still say to them, is that we want them to commit to spending at least 30 days in the course of a year with the Protégé. And most of them spend quite a bit more than that. We thought that they could work together, they could talk, the young person could watch rehearsals or simply observe, or they could have intensive weeks of internship. It has mostly worked out that way, but we are starting to see variations in these roles.

Three cycles of the program have been completed now. When you say that you are now seeing changes in the roles of the Mentor and Protégé, how are they changing?

Looking at the third cycle, I think the artists are getting more ambitious, and really more authentic in their work together. Obviously some relationships (between Mentor and Protégé) have been better than others and some are closer than others. However what's been interesting to observe in the third cycle is that generally Mentors were getting more involved in the Protégés' work. We have three such examples this year. One is a collaboration in the visual arts: between John Baldessari and Alejandro Cesarco. They actually created a piece of work together. In the gift bag from the gala there is a book called *Retrospective*, which illustrates a series of prints that were done by these two artists. This is an example where Mentor and Protégé actually produced a piece of work together. We had never had such a thing before.

Another example was Stephen Frears (Film Mentor) who said, "I am not going to be making a film during this period. I don't want somebody following me around. I would like to follow a young Protégé who is making a film." So the role was reversed. Stephen actually went to Peru (where Josu? M?ndez, film Protégé, comes from). He did not go there when the Protégé shot the film but he was certainly there before, collaborated on the script and played an important role in the editing and post-production processes. That was an example of the Mentor basically following the Protégé, rather than vice versa.

One more interesting example that happened this year was in literature: The Mentor, Tahar Ben Jelloun, guided his Protégé (Edem Awumey), who was writing

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his third novel. They discussed the story and character development – the Mentor participated a lot. But Tahar Ben Jelloun also asked his Protégé to comment on a new work that he was doing. So the Protégé participated in the creation of his Mentor's new novel.

Why did this kind of collaborative work happen for the first time in the third cycle?

I don't know why it happened now. I can only speculate. First of all, I think the level of Protégé is rising. Not that they were not good in the first cycle, but the recent Protégés have been more established artists. We have now set a cut-off age: No Protégé can be over 40 years old. We are aware that the Mentors are interested in a Protégé's body of work, and most of them have the idea of "young" artists – not students but young professionals who are starting out. So, the Protégés in the third cycle are older – and the level is getting higher, more accomplished than those in the first and second cycles, I think. But also we have to pull back a little bit and consider that this program is really for young artists who "need" it; not the people who are already making it on their own. The average age of the Protégés is still about 30, because Protégés in dance and especially in music are very young. Also, sometimes a Mentor does not want someone who is too old.

Another reason for this increased collaboration involves personality. At the beginning, we thought that the Mentors would be the givers. But when the second cycle got started and ever since then, the Mentors have told us, "We are actually getting more out of this than the Protégés." So maybe we have shifted our emphasis from "passing down" to one more of "exchange." And then, we at Rolex have become more confident in this program. I think you realize what a scary thing this program is – because we basically are throwing strangers together, and hoping that something is going to happen.

It is basically a sort of forced "blind date."

(Laughs) Yes, I often say we have not had any divorces so far! Of course all relationships are different, but so far, each of the pairs have had meaningful exchanges. So we are now more confident that the program actually does work. We at the Rolex Secretariat (who run the program) are taking risks all the time, but I think we can be more relaxed as we have learned through what has happened in the program.

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What is the Mentor selection process like? I know Mentors are selected by the program's Advisory Board members. After the Advisory Board recommends some potential Mentors, do you go out to those candidates and talk to them to find out how much they are interested in participating?

The board met earlier this year in Geneva to discuss the Mentors for the fourth cycle. They make suggestions for Mentors, discuss them, and then vote. They come up with a short list of four to five names per discipline. Take Rebecca Horn, (who is going to be a visual arts Mentor for the fourth cycle) for example. Giuseppe Penone, who is an Italian sculptor, and Maria de Corral, a Spanish curator who was in-charge of the last Venice Biennale – both of them know Rebecca Horn and they said to her, “The board recommended you, we’d like you to do this.” And then they put me in touch with her. She then agreed to join the program. That is basically how the recruitment happens.

But it sometimes happens that we may approach Mentor candidates on behalf of our board and they are interested but can't do it because the timing is not right. So we have to have some flexibility. Someone like the film director Martin Scorsese (who will be a fourth cycle Mentor), we had contacted some time ago. We try to maintain our network of people who have been suggested before and who were interested in participating. And we may go back to them later. We could say the Mentor selection process is always ongoing. For example, recently I sat at a dinner next to a quite well-known film director and I told him we would like him to be a Mentor some day, and he said he'd love to do it in the future. But then, of course, we have to go through our Advisory Board and they have to approve it.

Also, we have to make sure to have diversity. For example, for next year we have two women, and two Europeans, two Africans and two Americans. Unfortunately, we do not have any Asians, but at least we have to have a balance and a certain amount of mix. We can't have all six Americans or all six men. So I need a certain amount of flexibility to put together that mix of Mentors.

In general, do the board members personally know the potential Mentors they recommend? I am asking this because the personality of a Mentor must be very important.

Yes, absolutely. That is the purpose of the Advisory Board. We have a whole series of criteria for Mentors. We invite artists who have international stature, have a body of work that is already considered to be enduring, and who are still creative, innovative and still actively working, are generous in spirit, articulate, and can relate to young people. When the board recommends Mentors, we discuss these criteria. It is quite fascinating to be part of this discussion. We tell them that these are all confidential conversations. The board members don't necessarily make recommendations from only their own discipline but may also make recommendations for other disciplines. Some names are put forward by board members who are not in that discipline, but when another member knows the artist in question, that member might say, “He/She is a great artist but cannot communicate well with others. I don't think he/she is the right person for this program.” That is why the board, which consists mainly of artists, also includes someone like the curator Maria de Corral, who works with a lot of artists and knows who is the right type of person. We really need both pieces of information: what they are like artistically and what it is like to work with them practically. These are obviously quite critical criteria.

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Do you use a rotation system for board members?

Basically, the board changes with every cycle. We at Rolex assemble the board members each time through research and with information from past board members. We always make sure to have at least two board members in one discipline. (NOTE: as of November 2007, the total number of advisors is 53. See the complete list at: www.rolexMentorProtege.com/en/about-the-initiative/advisory-board.jsp) Sometimes a few board members eventually become Mentors. I would like to have former Mentors join the board, which I think can be quite useful – but it hasn't happened yet. Sometimes members carry over to the next cycle. I am thinking about Michael Ondaatje, who has served as a board member for both cycles three and four. Since he could not physically attend the board meeting in Geneva for cycle three and only participated through a conference call, we invited him back for cycle four.

As we Nominators of the Protégés come from many places on the planet, we quite often “meet” via conference calls over a period of several months. How often do the Advisory Board members use meetings or conference calls to make a list of potential Mentors?

Each Advisory Board meets only once in Geneva. Advisory Board members have a much easier job than the Nominators. They only have to give us some suggestions of artists they recommend as Mentors, and meet to discuss the suggestions. Advisory Board members serve as volunteers and don't get paid, while we pay Nominators because we know we ask them to do quite a demanding job (*).

*NOTE

about the Nominating Panel:

Each discipline has a Nominating Panel that consists of five to six experts whose responsibility is to identify and suggest a few Protégé candidates. The Nominators are selected based on recommendations from Advisory Board members and previous Nominating Panels, as well as Rolex's own research. They are recruited to represent geographically diverse areas. For example, one Nominator from each continent (North and South America, Asia, Europe, and Africa.) Taking into consideration what type of young artist the Mentor is seeking, each Nominator conducts a search over several months in his/her own region and nominates three to five names of young and talented artists. Since the Nominators remain anonymous, it is Rolex staff's responsibility to contact each nominated artist to ask if he/she is interested in applying to the program. If the artist is interested, Rolex staff then collects the artist's work samples and proposal, and duplicates these materials to distribute to each Nominator. Then the Nominators review this vast volume of material – dozens of DVDs if one serves on the theater or dance or film panel and 100 of pages of writing if they serve on the literature panel, etc. As the final step, the Nominators physically meet at a selected city to discuss the nominations and suggest a final short list (three to four names) of Protégé candidates. The Mentor is given the responsibility of selecting his/her Protégé from this short list.

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Why does only the music discipline recruit musicians, who are interpretive artists, while artists in all other genres are all creative artists: visual artists, theater directors, choreographers, filmmakers, writers? For the sake of consistency, shouldn't the music discipline have select composers rather than musicians or conductors of Western classical music?

Well, in contrast to this, the next music Mentor, Youssou N'Dour (from Senegal), is really about both creating and interpreting. He writes a lot of his own works and he is interested in working with young composer-instrumentalists. In music we are getting away from classical music and more towards world music and new forms. Talking about creating as opposed to interpreting, in the dance discipline, Mentors have told us that they were interested in dancers who want to become choreographers. They said they can't really teach choreography because you just learn it as you are doing it. So I don't think it's really fair to say there is a dichotomy between the creative and the interpretive.

Actually some people suspect that the reason why composers are not in the music discipline is probably because the general public cannot recognize even the most established composers' names. They are not as well known as established choreographers such as Anna Teresa De Keersmaecker or William Forsythe. Although the Mentor and Protégé program's purpose is purely the support of the arts and artists, Rolex as a company still needs to make an effective impact with the general public by involving big names, with hopes that the brand image will be even more enhanced.

I see you are talking about the celebrity status of the artists involved. It's a mix. Let's take the choice of Kate Valk as a theater Mentor in the next cycle. She is a lead performer of the Wooster Group in downtown New York. The Wooster Group is well known, but how many people are familiar with her name? She is a kind of insider's choice. She has chosen to avoid celebrity: she doesn't do film or commercial production, she just works for the Wooster Group. But people on our board told us that she was the most fabulous actress in America today and was hugely respected by artists and insiders. Obviously, Martin Scorsese (as a film Mentor also in the next cycle) is very different.

Also, in our inaugural cycle, in architecture we had Alvaro Siza as a Mentor. Unless you are an architect you wouldn't necessarily know who he is. In the same year, we had Toni Morrison in literature, and she is a household name.

So, it is not fair to say we only go for really big-name celebrities. We have been trying to mix people from inside choices and big names.

Does this program have any specific criteria to evaluate the results?

No, we don't. The Advisory Board's main job is to recommend and help us to recruit Mentors. But we also consult them generally on the program. We ask them about things like whether we should have a multi-disciplinary category; should we insist that the Mentor still be active and working. One of the most important questions for me in the last board meeting was whether we at Rolex should be more ambitious in terms of results and output of the program. Should we require, for example, that the Protégé completes a project during the mentoring year? Or, should we have some sort of benchmarks? But in the last meeting the Advisory Board said, "No, don't do that. What you are doing is great. You won't know for ten years what the real impact of this has been." So we don't actually evaluate. Even with the first group, it has been five years but it is still too early to know what the impact is.

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When the program was started, did Rolex set any time frame? For example, did you say that at least you should continue this program for a certain number of years, or that you should stop after, say, five cycles and then review it to make necessary changes and/or adjustments?

No, we will have to see. I think it is too early for this Mentor and Protégé project to make any major changes. For the future, we are going to continue doing what we have been doing since the first year. I can tell you that the Rolex Awards for Enterprise program, for example, has been around for 30 years. Now, after 30 years, we are saying, “OK, should we continue, or should we do something different?” And we are going to change it slightly at the end of 2008.

Rolex is over 100 years old and it has been an extremely successful brand. Patrick Heiniger is only the third CEO in the history of the company. So what is interesting in Rolex is that we do things more long-term. For us, five years is not really enough. We could look at something after 20 or 30 years and then say, “OK, what should we do? Does this make sense? Should we go on?” So you see, it is a very different time frame. There is longevity and continuity. If you are a privately held firm like this, you can do things really in medium to long term. And you have staying-power to build on something long term. I am sure that at some point, maybe after ten years, we will look at what we are doing, where we are going and decide whether this is good or not.

But, it already is changing. For example, there is the case of the “Rolex Arts Weekend,” (taking place on the weekend previous to the gala in New York). We had six events (in several venues in Manhattan, where current and previous Protégés’ works were publicly performed, exhibited, read and screened) plus the symposium. This is the first time that we’ve done something like this. Two years ago we did a mini version of this program at Columbia University, aimed mainly at students. I would say the public outreach and educational aspects of the program are growing. So that’s changing. But at the moment, I think as far as Rolex is concerned, we are meeting so many interesting people, helping people, and creating a lot of good will for the company in an unprecedented way.

While Rolex has promoted this program as international and emphasized diversity, some people have said that this program is very Western/American-centric, or Atlantic Ocean-centric based on the fact that the gala has always taken place in New York and having six disciplines is the Western convention. How do you react to those comments?

As for the six disciplines, the discussion has been ongoing with the Advisory Board and I think we are probably going in the direction of not having category-by-category selection in the future. We discussed whether we should have a multi-disciplinary category, and in fact, some artists could not be placed in any of the current categories. But we can’t be “all over the place.” You have to look at the practical aspects of running the program. For example, Wole Soyinka (from Nigeria), who is going to be the new literature Mentor, said that he could work with someone in English or even French or Spanish, and that he could mentor a writer of plays, poetry, novels and essays. This is a bit too wide-open. From the practical point of view of finding and selecting Protégés, you have to narrow it down. I think we have to be specific about some things.

Another issue may depend on the discipline. Take visual arts for example. Where is visual arts happening at the moment? It is very much in the U.S., to a certain extent in the U.K. or Germany, and now China is starting to come up. But if you ask

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people, “Who are the great artists who can serve as Mentors?”, it is likely that you will get American names. So that determines the debate a little bit.

At the moment, the Rolex program is certainly more based in Europe and America than, let's say, Asia and Latin America. It's more of an Atlantic program rather than a Pacific program. For the fourth cycle, we have two Mentors from America, two from Europe and two from Africa. Unfortunately, there is no Asian Mentor this year. It depends on the Advisors and Nominators. So, I think to get more influence of, let's say, Asia, we have to get more Advisors and Nominators from Asia.

Related to the “Atlantic program” matter, I guess there is also an issue of the language barrier. When you select a Mentor, especially in theater and literature, do you consider the element of what language he or she speaks?

The answer is yes and no. In some disciplines, like dance, language is very relative. Former Dance Mentor William Forsythe felt the fact that his Protégé (Chinese Tibetan dancer) Sang Jijia did not speak English very well was an advantage in their creative exchanges! In literature and theater, on the other hand, a common verbal language is absolutely essential.

Moreover, there is an ideal world and there is a real world where you have to be practical. One of our board members once suggested a Hungarian writer. His work has never been translated into another language. He is apparently a wonderful writer, but how would he work with a Protégé? He speaks a little German, but that's it. A pool of potential Protégés writing in Hungarian is.... well, who could be a Protégé? We once had a Chinese Mentor suggested but the person only speaks Chinese. That means that we would have to have a Chinese-speaking Protégé. It is an interesting issue because this program is about exchanging across generations as well as crossing borders and cultures. We could make a political statement about diversity and inclusiveness, but what are we going to do with these cases? How do we make them happen? Fortunately, English is the language in which most people in the world, including in the arts, communicate. We are kind of stuck with this. It is not necessarily desirable, but it is just a reality.

What kind of professional career do you want the Protégés to have? It may be different depending on discipline, but....

I personally want the Protégés to have an impact on their fields, on their communities, and that they themselves will be able to be Mentors one day. Some of them have started their own mentorship programs in their home countries, though we don't extend official support for such activities. They are Lara Foot Newton, theater Protégé in South Africa, and Junaid Jemal Sendi, dance Protégé in Ethiopia. Both of them were Protégés in the second cycle. Since they were so inspired by their own experience in the Rolex program, despite their young age, they thought it was time to become mentors themselves.

Can you tell me the project budget?

It is very difficult to aggregate the total investment Rolex makes in this project because we have the gala, events, publications, panels and a lot more. But in terms of “direct grants” and “direct expenses” for the project, it is about \$700,000 in total. Each of the six Mentors gets \$50,000, and each of the six Protégés gets \$25,000 during the mentoring period. We give an additional \$25,000 to each Protégé after the mentoring period is over, allowing them to put on performances, exhibitions and other public displays and such. For this, the Protégés have to submit proposals for these projects within two years after the mentoring period.

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Besides, we pay a lot of the Protégés' living expenses and travel. Sometimes we pay the Mentors' travel expenses if they want to see the Protégé's work. Those are direct expenses.

I have finished all the questions I prepared. Is there anything you want to add?

This program is growing and deepening. The number of people who have actively participated in this project: Mentors and Protégés, Nominators like yourself and Advisors – total over 200 in the last five years. They are artists and artistic leaders from more than 40 countries. This is becoming an amazing community of artists from around the world.

The other thing I think is interesting is the connections that are being made. There are a lot of unexpected spin-offs that have been happening through the program. For example, Protégés are now getting to know each other, so we are hoping that they will think of crossing discipline borders and become interested in other art forms, moving across the different media.

And it has been a useful opportunity for the Nominating Panels, too, as you mentioned earlier. What is happening is that, even if young artists are not selected as finalists or as Protégés, they still come to the attention of the members of the Nominating Panels who learn about them. The Nominators are festival directors, presenters and curators – so one of them might say that although this young artist did not become a Protégé, I want to invite this person to participate in my festival. So the program actually helps all of the young artists who are nominated.

Yes, in fact, a theater company whose director was one of the artists I nominated two years ago drew the attention of one of my colleagues on the Nominating Panel, and this company was actually invited to her festival.

See. That's exactly it, a very, very interesting spin-off.

Last question. When I served as a Nominator, I was told that we were all "secret" panels. Should I still keep it secret?

We wanted you to be anonymous when you were serving. But the period you served is over, so it is no longer a secret. Actually it would be a good introduction to the program if you would tell others that it was very interesting being on the panel, and that you learned something from the other nominators and learned about young artists whom you didn't know.

All right, I will absolutely do so. Thank you so much for your time.