



...February 21, 2:42 PM

<Home



News:

- » Feature Story
- » Action Desk
- » Cop Blotter
- » Deadline
- » 50Plus

Commentary:

- » In Your Opinion
- » In Our Opinion
- » Q Confidential
- » Not 4 Publication

Entertainment:

- » Restaurant Review
- » Leisure

Q Guides:

- » Queens Culture
- » Best of Queens2002
- » Dining Guide
- » 50plus Dining
- » Queens Today

Resources:

- » 2003 Anniversary
- » 2002 YearInReview
- » 32nd Anniversary
- » Shulman Legacy
- » Bridal Planner
- » Queens Business
- » Inside Queens 30yrs
- » Vintage Queens

Classifieds:

Contact:

- » Editorial
- » Sales
- » Webmaster

<Old Website

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State Of The Arts The Scene In Queens Is One Of Diversity And Creativity Thanks In Part To QCA

By Juliet Werner

Money Becomes Available

Last month, the Tribune reported on the plight of one of the City's premier arts organizations. Long Island City's Flux Factory, which calls itself a "not for profit arts organization supporting innovation in things," will soon give up its warehouse to the Metropolitan Transit Authority.



Percussia a chamber music ensemble has received another grant.

MTA is eyeing the 7,500-square-foot warehouse on 43rd Street as it would provide improved access to a train storage yard. The site also sits at a critical location for "East Side Access," a \$6.3 billion project connecting the LIRR's Main and Port Washington lines in Queens to a new terminal beneath Grand Central Station.

When Flux moved from Williamsburg to Long Island City just six years ago, it received a boost from Queens Council on the Arts. This year, the organization was awarded a grant from the Queens Community Arts Fund, a regrant program of the QCA.

According to Flux Executive Director Stephany Anne Goldberg, the extra funding couldn't come at a better time. "The money that we received from QCA is for admin help and development," Goldberg said. "That will be necessary wherever we go."

Flux is not the only arts organization to benefit from QCA's regrant program. In fact, 87 honorees were awarded more than \$270,000 to put toward the future of the borough's arts scene.

What is a Regrant Program?

The awardees applied for grants from QCA's Queens Community Arts Fund in October of last year. They sat through information sessions and filled out extensive paperwork. Some requirements are not negotiable; all applicants must be based in Queens and organizations must have been in existence for at least one year. The quality of the application itself is assessed by a team of panelists.

"The artists are judged on their ability to articulate the project, how well they

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can calculate a budget and their support materials,” QCA Managing Director Lynn Lobell said. “The panelists are comprised of arts administrators, artists, community members that are interested in having a say as to how the state and city money is spent within the community. We try to make sure that there are people of all backgrounds on the panel, including diverse ethnicities, from different neighborhoods in Queens, age diversity and different disciplines.”

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The regranted money comes from a variety of sources including the New York State Council on the Arts, Decentralization Program; New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Greater New York Arts Development Fund and JPMorgan Chase Foundation.

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A First-Timer

Musician Natalaia Paruz Munson lives in Astoria, not far from the Flux Factory. Born in Israeli, Munson moved to Queens 18 years ago and followed the burgeoning arts scene with great interest.

“When I first came here there weren’t many artists here or if there were it wasn’t obvious,” Munson said. “I was searching for places to perform...I approached the local bank, the postal office. I had to initiate my own stuff.” Munson, now known as “Saw Lady,” gained popularity once she started playing at Community Centers such as the Salvation Army, which approached her after a devastating robbery.

“At that time I did not intend to be a performer – but I heard their story and how could I say no,” Munson said. “I came and put on a one-hour presentation and they loved it and they asked me to come back...My phone just started ringing.”

Having trained as a dancer, Munson had not envisioned a life as a professional musician, but she was easily swayed.

“With all this encouragement, it made me realize maybe this is what I should be doing,” she said. “I just followed everybody’s advice.”

One piece of advice she received again and again was that she should apply for a grant from QCA’s Community Arts Fund.

“It’s a very complicated process you have to fill out a lot of forms you have to express your idea very clearly,” Munson said. “It’s not enough to have a vague idea of what you might want to do you have to explain in detail.”

It was worth the toil, said Munson, who received \$2,500; \$500 more than the amount she requested in her application. The new budget has enabled Munson to book the Trinity Lutheran Church, which seats 300 people. Last year’s venue, the Astoria Historical Society, couldn’t accommodate the audience, which came to see saw players from as far as India, China and Japan.

In the past, the saw players performed to pre-recorded backup music. This year, there will be a pianist, organist, singers and a hand bell group.

“It’s really going to change the event and make it bloom,” Munson said, adding that Queens has become the place for saw players to discover new techniques and meet like-minded musicians.

“A lot of saw players are isolated,” she said. “I met a Long Island saw player and he was absolutely sure he was the only saw player in the world.”

Munson suspects her commitment to the festival and her loyalty to the borough separated her from the pack of other applicants.

“I imagine because I’ve already been doing it for the past five years I’ve proven that I’m capable,” she said. “Also the fact that I’ve been performing for so many

years in Queens... I'm not a fly by night. Not somebody who comes here and lives here and is using Queens for a jumping board for Manhattan. I'm here and here to stay."

Artists Come Back For More

Percussia, a chamber music ensemble based in Jackson Heights, has received grant after grant from QCA.

"It's been our lifeline," Artistic Director and percussionist Ingrid Gordon said, adding this year she received more funding than ever before. She asked for the maximum amount, \$8,000, and received \$7,500.

The money will go toward funding a Gamelan project aimed at Elmhurst's growing Indonesian community. The Gamelan is an ensemble of xylophones, metallophones, plucked strings, drums and gongs.

"I think they're looking for an interesting project and I think they're looking for people who can successfully pull off what they say they're going to do and spend the money in a responsible way and generate as much audience turnout as possible," Gordon said. "A sound realistic budget, a good marketing plan and I suppose a good track record probably doesn't hurt either."

Now that the grant has been awarded, Gordon begins what she calls "boots on the ground networking."

"Just because you're playing the music of those particular people doesn't necessarily mean that they'll turn out in droves. They have to know about it," she said, adding that she speaks Indonesian.

Gordon expects the free Gamelan concert to take place in September at one of the branches of the Queens Library, ideally Flushing's.

"I have not yet had huge success getting grants from national organizations," Gordon confessed. "I guess they're a lot more competitive. I've had organizations tell me things like – we won't fund you cause your budget is so small, which is basically a vicious cycle. QCA is more open-minded, more willing to fund startups regardless of their budgets."

Look West

Even if the Flux Factory is forced to relocate, Western Queens is likely to remain the epicenter of the borough's arts scene. It is the destination for television casts and crews who work at Silvercup and Kaufman Astoria Studios. And this fall, it will welcome a new high school, the Academy for Careers in Television and Film.

Through its regrant program, QCA attempts to fund artists and organizations from a variety of Queens neighborhoods. In addition, QCA announced it will offer five free networking events to further encourage mixing and mingling. Of course, four of the five are scheduled to take place in the western-most section of the borough.

For more information call 718-647-3377 or visit www.queenscouncilarts.org.



Saw lady was awarded her first QCA grant this year.



A recent installation at the Flux Factory representing the over development in New York.

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