

Showcase celebrates 50 years of ArtsWestchester

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ArtsWestchester is ready to kick off ArtSee, a five-month showcase for new work, in celebration of the organization's 50th anniversary.

For years, Westchester residents in search of the arts would bypass the county altogether.

"Most people viewed Westchester as a bedroom community," says Janet Langsam, CEO of ArtsWestchester. "You slept here, but you got on the train to New York."

But no longer does it take a commute to get cultured. (See related story on Rockland County's Blue Hill Art & Cultural Center below)

When Langsam starting working for ArtsWestchester, the largest private not-for-profit arts council in the state, the county was still forming its identity in the arts community. Now, she says, you "don't have to go beyond Westchester to hear and see the best music and fine arts."



Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company performs on April 25 at Academic Arts Theatre in Valhalla.

ArtsWestchester is ready to stage an endurance test when it kicks off ArtSee, a five-month showcase for new work, in celebration of the organization's 50th anniversary.

Collaborating with more than 40 organizations, ArtsWestchester created a program of more than 70 events in dance, film, art, theater and music in venues around the county from March through July.

While ArtSee will promote new work from local, national and international artists, it's an opportunity to look back at how far the county has come in nurturing creativity.

"(ArtSee) is just one example of how the cultural community understands that by working together they build a much larger arts audience here in the county," Langsam says. "The arts are really starting to matter to people's lives in Westchester."

The effort to host a showcase of this size was a lengthy process. Planning and funding efforts started two years ago. A panel of impartial judges reviewed applications in each category — with a focus on finding Westchester artists to participate. ArtsWestchester board members were also involved in reviewing the artwork. With so many applicants, some artists were turned away.

From exhibits about artists who work with unusual materials to dark-comedy puppet shows to versatile musicians performing Celtic-infused music, the massive listing of events reflects the variety of artistic disciplines ArtsWestchester works to promote.



Ramon Flowers will present "Taboo," at the Yonkers Riverfront Library on June 28. (Photo: Submitted photo/Eve Cuyen)

One of the exhibits features photography from members of the Westchester Photographic Society. "Travels With My Camera" showcases travel photographs from exotic destinations provided by members of the society as well as outside submissions. The exhibit runs from March 15 through April 24 at the JCC of Mid-Westchester.

Liza Wallis Margulies, a society member and the exhibit's organizer, says it will provide visibility for their organization. "It's a nice way for us to show the community what we're all about."

Most of the society's members aren't professional photographers or artists, but Jim Christensen, the society's president, says doing a public exhibit is a "wonderful way" for them to gain confidence in their work.

"I'm tremendously impressed with the local talent we have in Westchester," Christensen says. "It's not just photography, it's sculpture, painting, music. ... The event is a great way to see how amazingly talented your neighbors are."

ArtsWestchester was founded in 1965 to create a cultural center, similar to Lincoln Center, in the suburbs. The founding board settled for a more modest start, developing the organization into a vital part of the arts culture in the area, with more than \$1.2 million in grants awarded to

more than 300 arts organizations and individual artists on a yearly basis.

"(ArtsWestchester) has grown in its professionalism and its breadth," says board member Froma Benerofe. "It's a broad agenda that we have and we've added things on along the way that enhance the arts and therefore the Westchester community."

"It's a huge accomplishment for an arts organization like ours to have a hub," she says. "It helps us have an identity and bring more artists and people in to experience the arts."

Part of growing a viable arts community is the ability to bring in outside talent. ArtSee will also feature renowned artists from outside the suburbs. The Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company performs all over the country and around the globe, most recently in Bosnia.



The Orchestra of St. Luke's conductor, Peter Oundijan. The Orchestra will perform on June 20. photo by Gabe Palacio

"We're delighted to be a part of the celebration," says Dorfman. As for what the audience can expect from her troupe: "I love the notion of creating worlds for the audience to enter," she says. "Each piece is unique in its own right."

Bringing the best to Westchester was an important part of the plan for Langsam, but capping off five decades of growth starts with showing off what we have in our own backyard.

"One of the things that ArtSee is about is the richness of cultural life in Westchester," Langsam says. "For families it's affordable, it's accessible and people can give their families a rich cultural experience without going anywhere."

If You Go

What: ArtSee

When: March-July

Where: For a complete schedule of the events, go to artswestchester.org/50th-anniversary