

Corralling *The Arts*

by Stew Mosberg

When cultural hounds out this way feel the need to indulge their fancy for theater, dance, music and art, they might plan a visit to New York City, or in some cases, the itch may be sated with a scenic drive to Santa Fe. Well, be still my heart, Durango is poised to have its very own week of artistic wonder.

Three years ago the town of Durango hosted an arts meeting attended by Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper. The meeting was originally held to share ideas about how art could be an economic catalyst; it has taken until now to hatch a concept.

To explore ways of stimulating the local economy and bringing in tourist dollars after Labor Day, a public forum was held in September 2009 to consider staging a weeklong art festival in Durango. After receiving a favorable response from the diverse, culturally focused audience, a second meeting was held, leading to the selection of September 10 through 19 for what is now called the Durango Showcase of the Arts.

The Business Improvement District and the Durango Area Tourist Office scraped together several thousand dollars to help promote the Showcase. Bob Kunkel, downtown events and business development manager, and the originator of the idea, is continuing to seek funding from other sources. In the meanwhile, the restructured Durango Arts Center is helping to

coordinate the event and is also playing an important role by reinstating the outdoor Autumn Arts Festival on 2nd Avenue, which will be held September 11-12. Connie Imig, artist and DAC board member, is keeper of the calendar and chief conduit of information. During April's Showcase meeting Imig clearly defined the program as a "community effort."

From its inception, Kunkel believed the Showcase should be a collaborative happening between anchor art organizations and others. To date, the DAC, Music in the Mountains, Durango Independent Film Festival, San Juan Symphony, Community Concert Hall at Fort Lewis College, and several individual art groups have demonstrated a high level of interest by scheduling performances and exhibits. At least a dozen programs and events have been scheduled, and it is anticipated that the number will double.



The Community Concert Hall will be the scene of jazz and classical performances. Other venues will host bluegrass and Celtic programs. There will be theater, dance and literature. St. Mark's Episcopal Church's Third Avenue Arts organization is planning a salsa festival, featuring the condiment and the dance, with a salsa-making competition coupled with dance lessons by Suzi DiSanto, and Ryan McCurry's exciting local band, Chico Blanco.

For visual artists, one opportune venue in the planning stage is an invitational "Salon des Indépendants" exhibition, where non-represented artists will have a gallery showing. An art gallery walk will be held on the first weekend, and the Open Studios Tour will be held at the other end.

Visitors to the Showcase will have their choice of creative pursuits to attend, and the plethora of things to do and see should stimulate the senses and draw people from outside the Four Corners.

Susan Lander, executive director of Music in the Mountains, is convinced that the venture's success will come from the participation of as many organized and independent art groups as possible. "It will require a singular focus," she believes, "by a group of diverse people who understand the big picture and can agree on schedules and format."

Ideally, a large turnout will generate sales revenues for all local businesses, as well as tax revenues for the City of Durango. Early in the planning stage, Kunkel said that the Showcase is "an empty vessel to be filled with art and cultural content. If it is not overflowing with our community's best artists' efforts — the marketable kind that draw interest and attendance — then we have little to promote."

One can only hope the Durango Showcase of the Arts becomes an annual occurrence and helps to make Durango the leading art community in Southwestern Colorado.

For updates, ticket information and the growing calendar of events, check out the official website: <http://www.durangoshowcaseofthearts.org>.

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