

Arts and culture groups think outside the box

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Arts and culture nonprofits are discovering that when they start connecting with prospective audiences in new ways, amazing things can happen.

“They’re learning how to get out of the box and reach audiences where they are,” said Charlie Rathbun, arts program director at 4Culture, the cultural services agency for King County. “People are encountering art without pre-conceived ideas,” he said, “When people happen upon art by accident, it’s different. In some ways, it’s more pure.”

Research shows that in 2002, the average audience member at a classical music event was 49 years old.

“Audiences are graying, but that’s not a new thing,” Rathbun said. “Because most organizations depend on ticket sales for 50 percent of their income, with each new generation, audience building needs to happen again.”

A COMMUNITY PRESENCE

People don’t just wake up the morning they turn 40 with a magical urge to buy a ticket to the theater. They need to be found, cultivated and nurtured.

In 2006, Keri Healy, a Seattle playwright, won a 4Culture grant to bring the theater experience to Renton’s IKEA store. Using furniture in the showroom displays as props, actors from the Printer’s Devil Theatre presented 12 mini-plays. Shoppers passing by unexpectedly encountered art—some who might have never experienced theater before.

“IKEA makes the shopping experience fun for their customers and the theater experience is about having fun, too,” said Rathbun. “It was a good fit.”

Karen Bouton, coordinator of the Saar Cemetery Project in Kent, was looking for a way to make history more interesting. Her 4Culture-funded project uses actors to engage people in the lives of six of the pioneers buried in the cemetery, including the very first, Margaret Saar, who died in 1873. In period clothing, the actors perform in character, standing beside the pioneers’ gravestones.

“Museums can be dry,” Bouton said, “but this is quick, brief, historical. Being outside and watching costumed actors make it more interesting for children. And kids in grades seven through 12 can tie it to historical periods they are studying in school.”

Productions are tentatively scheduled for July 17 and 18 at the cemetery.

KID-FRIENDLY OUTREACH

Developing young people’s interest in arts and culture is an important strategy.

“Our members are doing a lot to reach young audiences,” said Barbara McMichael, administrator at SoCo



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Evergreen City Ballet’s ballet mistress teaches third, fourth, and fifth graders the basic principles of ballet as part of the organization’s Dance Alive! program.

Culture, a coalition that connects audiences, artists and cultural resources. “We are constantly updating our Web site with new opportunities for young people, such as classes and auditions.”

Evergreen City Ballet (ECB) in Renton introduces ballet to third, fourth and fifth graders with Dance Alive!, a donor-supported program that reached 1,200 children last year and 2,100 children this year in south King County.

“Our ballet mistress visits students in their gym classes,” said ECB’s artistic director, Kevin Kaiser. “They learn the terminology, the basic positions, and jumps and leaps. When they first walk in, the boys say, ‘Oh, ballet.’ But usually, once they get into it, they don’t want to stop.”

The Burien-based Northwest Symphony Orchestra (NSO) is nurturing a love of classical music in kids by sending a conductor to work with middle school students to compose an original piece of music, which they performed at a concert at the Highline Performing Arts Center in April.

And the Renton History Museum took a hard look at its educational outreach component as its leadership developed a soon-to-be-published museum master plan.

“A few years ago, we lost funding for the third grade tours,” said Elizabeth Stewart, museum director. “We couldn’t get the kids in, so we started talking about taking the museum to them.”

The museum developed curriculum in two areas of Renton’s history: for eighth graders, a coal mining focus and for fourth graders, a study of the Duwamish people, who were the first known settlers in the area.

“The Muckleshoot tribe generously provided funding and resources so a Native American storyteller can visit every school in Renton School District,” said Stewart.

SOCIAL MEDIA: NEW TOOLS

“Another way to build audiences is

to engage them, said 4Culture’s Rathbun. “If it feels like someone else’s event, it’ll stay that way. But if you meet the audience where they already are, then you have made a connection—and they have made an investment.”

One way local nonprofits are doing that is through social media. Boston-based John Haydon, owner of the consulting firm Inbound Zombie, helps nonprofits develop ways to use social media to reach new audiences.

“The value of the Web is three-fold,” he said. “Saving resources by creating content once and having it consumed thousands of times; empowering supporters as spokespeople and fundraisers; and quickly spreading information, especially during catastrophic events, like the earthquake in Haiti.”

“The social media piece has been an interesting one,” Renton History Museum’s Stewart said. “It has been pretty successful in terms of getting new visitors.”

The museum is on the social networking Web site Facebook and Twitter, the micro-blogging site that allows users to send brief (140 characters or fewer) messages called “tweets” to their network of followers.

“We were one of the early adopters with Twitter,” Stewart said, “We now have more than 500 followers. Many are young and creative professionals, a group we have been looking for a way to reach.”

What still surprises Stewart?

“It’s when a visitor pops into the museum for the first time and I find out that it was because of one of our tweets.”

Evergreen City Ballet also markets its programs on Facebook and Twitter.

“Through Facebook, we have already found 90 ECB alumni,” said Kaiser,” and now we can bring them back into our network.”

“Building new audiences needs to be a grass-roots effort,” 4Culture’s Rathbun said. “You can’t convert

someone in one show. The schools play a role in nurturing the arts. Support from the community is necessary. Finally, you get people to a professional performance. School-home-community. Then you have a connection.”

An on-line guide to area arts and culture

- Evergreen City Ballet**
www.evergreencityballet.org
On Twitter: <http://twitter.com/ecballet>
- John Haydon**, social media strategist (free resources for nonprofits)
<http://inboundzombie.com>
On Twitter: <http://twitter.com/johnhaydon>
- Kent Historical Society**
www.kenthistoricalmuseum.org
- Northwest Symphony Orchestra**
www.northwestsymphonyorchestra.org
- Renton History Museum**
www.rentonhistory.org
On Twitter: <http://twitter.com/rentonhistory>
- SoCoCulture**
www.sococulture.org

FIVE SOCIAL MEDIA STARTER TIPS*

Listen and interact. Tune into blogs and Twitter for discussions related to your organization. Participating in on-line conversations will help you understand better how people are thinking and feeling.

Create relevant content. If you make it short, funny and remarkable in some way, it will be more likely to be spread on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Try sharing what people never see. What do our supporters want to see that no one has ever thought about sharing? Theater companies can post photos of set construction or show costume sketches on Flickr, the photo sharing Web site. Museum visitors never see the construction of exhibits, so YouTube videos of crates being unpacked and sets being painted might have a high sharing quotient.

Tell your story through location-based media. Promote your events through sites such as foursquare.com.

Use social networking sites to build your audience base. Put up a page on Facebook to collect new fans in exchange for discounted event tickets.

* Tips courtesy of social media consultant John Haydon