

Arts groups find unity in time of crisis

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For the arts and culture in Western New York, 2011 began in crisis and ended in triumph.

In January, the small and mid-sized cultural groups of Erie County were still reeling from County Executive Chris Collins' decision to cut them out of the county budget.

Twelve months later, after a period of unprecedented solidarity and collaboration among area theaters, galleries, museums and dance companies, Collins had been voted out of office and the groups' funding restored by the County Legislature.

That head-spinning chain of events ranks not only as the biggest arts story of the year but may prove one of the most important developments for culture in Western New York in the past decade.

"The cultural sector took a huge step forward in establishing itself as a constituency. We really stepped forward and said, 'We matter.' We matter to the public, we matter to the economy and quality of life," said Tod A. Kniazuk, executive director of the arts advocacy group Arts Services Initiative. "It's not that we're any more important now than we were 10 years ago. The difference is that we stuck together, stood up and were identified as such this year. I think that's just a quantum leap from where we were before."

And according to Kniazuk and other cultural leaders, this year's quantum leap marks the beginning of a period of growth and influence for the arts and cultural organizations in the Buffalo Niagara region.

While Western New York culture was having one of its most exhilarating years in memory, the region's arts scene saw plenty of major developments. Here's a run-down of some of the biggest cultural stories of the year:

* The year began sadly when, on Jan. 18, legendary documentary photographer Milton Rogovin died at age 101. His passing was noted across the country, as fans of Rogovin's unflinching portraits of working-class people around the world remembered the photographer's skill, his passion and his unwavering dedication to the less fortunate members of society.

* Rogovin's death was followed a month later by that of Manny Fried, the elder statesman of Buffalo's theater community, who died Feb. 25 at age 97. Fried, the playwright and labor leader who treaded the boards on Broadway with the likes of Elia Kazan and twice refused to name

names before the House Un-American Activities Committee, lived a life of deep principle and enormous productivity. His passing, like Rogovin's, marked the end of an era.

* Die-hard fans of popular Buffalo summer concert series Thursday at the Square shook their heads when its producer, Buffalo Place, announced that many of its concerts would move from Lafayette Square to the recently completed Erie Canal Harbor Central Wharf. But most of the doubters dropped their complaints after the venue was inaugurated by local favorite Lowest of the Low on June 30. A packed July 30 performance from the Tragically Hip sealed the deal: The waterfront, with better acoustics, more space to breathe and tons of growth potential, was a hit.

* In March, Tonawanda resident and former Air Force pilot Martin Kober attracted international attention for his remarkable assertion that he owned a painting by Renaissance master Michelangelo. The painting, which Kober's family had kept under a couch in their home near Rochester for nearly 25 years, was the subject of a book by Italian art conservator Antonio Forcellino. Because of Forcellino's support, the painting is on exhibition in Rome.* After a decade of planning and a year of crisis on the Erie County cultural scene, an organization called the Arts Services Initiative was launched in August. The advocacy group, which will take up and greatly expand the mantle of the defunct Arts Council in Buffalo and Erie County, is headed by the political staffer-turned-arts administrator Tod A. Kniazuk. His appointment and the formation of the initiative will have far-reaching consequences for the arts.

* A successful, years-long lobbying effort from the Buffalo Convention and Visitors Bureau (now Visit Buffalo Niagara) brought more than 2,500 people to the city for the National Trust for Historic Preservation's annual conference in mid-October. The successful four-day event, which shone the national spotlight on Buffalo's architectural gems, represented the city's most significant foray onto the national stage (at least, one not shaped like a football field or hockey rink) in at least a decade.

* In November, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery launched a yearlong celebration of its 150th anniversary with its sprawling exhibition "The Long Curve: 150 Years of Visionary Collecting." At the same time, the Buffalo Museum of Science celebrated its own sesquicentennial, with the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society to follow next July. This collective milestone for three of Buffalo's leading cultural institutions came at a time of renewed faith in the importance of culture in Western New York.

* Buffalo's two major National Public Radio stations, WBFO and WNED, announced that they would merge in July. WBFO, which had been supported and partially funded by the University at Buffalo since its founding in 1953, will now come under the WNED umbrella. The effects of the move on staff, content and news coverage have not yet become clear, though the move has prompted worry about the loss or weakening of an important local voice. The stations will continue to operate on the same frequencies.

* If not for Buffalo-born photographer Brendan Bannon, we'd all be blissfully unaware of Boyd Lee Dunlop, an 85-year-old jazz pianist and resident of a Delaware Avenue nursing home. Bannon discovered Dunlop and helped him to cut a record, in the process bringing national

attention to the musician and culminating in a standing-room-only concert in Babeville's Asbury Hall on Dec. 10.

Honorable mentions:

* The Albright-Knox Art Gallery replaced the steel diamond sculpture that had stood on its west lawn for more than 40 years with a jarring explosion of steel canoes by California artist Nancy Rubins. People are still talking.

* Another 85-year-old pianist, the legendary Randy Weston, came to Buffalo for a rare, three-day residency with the Langston Hughes Institute in November.

* Saul Elkin's Jewish Repertory Theatre, after skipping from venue to venue for nearly a decade, finally secured its own permanent home this summer at the Jewish Community Center in Getzville.

* In July, Buffalo Expat Network founder and art-lover Frits Abell launched the first Echo Art Fair in Buffalo's Central Terminal, a bold step in creating a serious market for work by local artists.

Top 10 local arts and culture stories of 2011

1. Threats to county funding of cultural groups
2. Death of photographer Milton Rogovin
3. Death of playwright and labor leader Manny Fried
4. Move of more concerts to Erie Canal Harbor Central Wharf
5. Tonawanda resident's claim that he owns a Michelangelo
6. Launch of the Arts Services Initiative
7. Hosting of National Trust for Historic Preservation's annual conference
8. Albright-Knox Art Gallery launches celebration of 150th anniversary
9. WBFO and WNED announce merger
10. National attention for jazz pianist Boyd Lee Dunlop