



Lehman Center for the Performing Arts

Music and theater thrive in diverse borough

The Bronx is alive with the sound of music, but lately the rhythm section includes hammers and saws. Organizations are flourishing throughout the borough but construction on one major renovation and two new additions drives the heartbeat.

"There's a lot of music history and a lot of energy here," said John MacElwee, director of the Hostos Center for Arts & Culture. "People don't have to go downtown for music, theater and dance."

Jorge Merced, associate artistic director at the Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, said Bronx artists often engage with audiences directly in their neighborhoods at places like community gardens. "The Bronx is such a fertile environment for artists but it is different from other boroughs," Merced said. "Artists are not just in traditional venues—people here are very creative and it is very grassroots."

Still, the borough's institutions offer artists and audiences unique homes for a variety of performances. "The Bronx is the most musical borough by far," said Peter Fine, principal and

co-founder of the Atlantic Development Group and founder of Bolivar Development.

The borough's biggest stage is also currently its biggest project: the Lehman Center for the Performing Art's 2,278-seat auditorium is finishing a \$15.4 million refurbishment. "There's tremendous competition in New York City so you always have to be innovative and creative. So lately we've been concentrating on our facility," said Eva Bornstein, executive director of the Lehman Center for the Performing Arts, on the campus at Lehman College/CUNY.

The theater is getting new seats and an upgrade for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance, while the lobby is being enlarged to ease crowding for audiences when shows are sold out. "We will have a new super-duper center," said Bornstein. "We want it to be the center of the cultural universe in the Bronx."

Lehman is one of very few performing arts centers where 90% of the revenue comes from earned income, Bornstein said, which means she must keep

tickets affordable and find acts that are high quality but broadly appealing enough to fill the seats. "My challenge is to make it a place for all culture so it is diverse like New York," said Bornstein, who oversees a celebrity series (including performances by Michael Bolton, Johnny Mathis, Patty Labelle, among others) and the Latino music series that's the heart of each season.

The borough's building boom is also music to the ears of performers. The new Bronx Point will offer 1,000 housing units but also attractions like the Universal Hip Hop Museum and an outdoor performance space with views of the Harlem River. And WHEDco (Women's Housing and Economic Development) is building Bronx Commons, an affordable housing development, that will include the Bronx Music Hall, the new home for the Bronx Music Heritage Center.

"Traditional music is the very spirit of the Bronx," said Elena Martínez, co-artistic director of the Bronx Music Heritage Center.

Currently, the center is housed in a 1,400-square-foot storefront that seats 60 and doubles as the Heritage Center's exhibit space and triples as its classroom. The new home will feature a 250-seat theater with separate classrooms and exhibit spaces. That theater fits nicely in the Bronx's wide range. Besides Lehman's large auditorium, there's also Pregones Theater's 124-seat space and Hostos, which has a 900-seat theater, a 350-seater and an 80-seat black box.

Building and expansion doesn't always involve hammers and nails. MacElwee said his art center, which has presented a mix of Afro-Caribbean music, dance and drama for 35 years is always evolving. "We put on programs that reflect our community and the Bronx is changing," he said.

Hostos has added hip-hop across mediums (dance, music, spoken word) with programming like Momma's Hip Hop Kitchen, a performance

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— Jorge Merced, Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater

event designed to showcase female artists. While salsa remains a draw, MacElwee has been adding more Dominican programming. This year featured Dominican-American playwright Marco Antonio Rodríguez's "Ashes of Light," performed half in English and half in Spanish. Bornstein said Lehman Center has also added Dominican programming. The African population is growing, though not from one particular country but since "Africa is not a monolith," MacElwee said Hostos is still exploring how best to represent the different countries and cultures.

Merced, whose theater at Pregones hosts music, dance, theater and comedy, said that even within one culture, there's always change. "No culture is stagnant—it's always being renewed, and so we are always in dialogue with the community," he said.

The community includes not just the people living in the Bronx and the artists but those who strive to bring these performing arts to life. While there's always room for new organizations, Martínez believes for now that the borough's arts community is an ideal size, where everyone knows and works together. "This is really an incredible time in the performing arts here."