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## CULTURAL ECONOMY

# Arts groups finding ways to thrive

BY DANIEL CHANG

dchang@MiamiHerald.com

Even as the economy tanks, or maybe because of it, some Miami cultural institutions are drawing larger audiences, according to an informal survey of South Florida arts groups.

Cultural leaders are cautiously optimistic because robust ticket sales alone are not enough to sustain most cultural nonprofits, which rely more on private donations and government grants to keep afloat.

Some of South Florida's biggest cultural insti-

tutions also have revealed serious financial challenges since October, when the drumbeat of bad news about the economy began to rise. But others are reporting larger-than-expected attendance to performances, exhibitions and seminars — sometimes because admission is discounted or free.

In downtown Miami, post-October attendance for presentations at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts has exceeded the benchmark of 60 to 65 percent of capacity per show set by chief executive John

Richard.

Richard, who came to Miami from the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in December, says he has encouraged attendance at the 2½-year-old center by improving the whole experience for audiences.

That includes creating concert series like Jazz Roots, which has sold out almost all of its six presentations. It also means improving parking, adding pre-performance talks with artists, and hosting mixers afterward.

"We're using the per-

• TURN TO ARTS GROUPS, 13M

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## Cultural events proving popular despite recession

### • ARTS GROUPS, FROM 1M

forming arts to bring people together, so we want to add value to that experience," Richard says.

Still, good attendance is not enough to sustain any nonprofit arts organization.

"Ticket sales alone will not make a healthy arts institution," Richard says. "Our fundraising has to be comprehensive."

The Arsht Center recently launched its first membership drive, mailing 55,000 appeals to potential donors, who are asked to contribute \$65 or more in exchange for benefits such as priority seating and discounts.

"We couldn't sell enough tickets to balance the budget of the institution each year if we want to be more for the community, and we do," Richard says.

Donations to the publicly owned center help pay for maintenance as well as a bevy of free events, such as the Gospel Sundays series, backstage tours, and outdoor concerts.

"Both sides of the equation have to be working in unison in order for the center to succeed," Richard says.

Bonnie Clearwater, executive director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, says collective concern over the economy or other crises often drives people together, and museums and theaters are well-suited for communing.

"We actually saw the same phenomena after 9/11 as well — that our members and audience gravitated to the museum," Clearwater says. "People have bonded with the museum and with the people they've met through the comfort to come here."

Clearwater says admissions revenue has exceeded expectations by about 17 percent since October, and she credits the museum's experiment with evening hours and its educational programs and special events.

MOCA events, such as Five Minutes of Fame, which introduces audiences to emerging artists, serve the institution's mission as well as its bottom line.

"The idea," Clearwater says, "is that we are offering what people want. We are visible in the way that donors like to see the institution visible, and we're being effective."

### STILL A STRUGGLE

For all the encouragement of increased attendance, though, "It's a struggle," she says.

Bank sponsorships of events, once considered automatic, are now uncertain. Museum staff must work "twice as hard," Clearwater says, to find sponsors and donors.

Not all arts institutions are reporting attendance increases. The recent 2009 Miami International Film Festival drew 63,000 movie fans compared to an estimated 74,000 in 2008.

Festival director Tiziana Finzi says film festivals across Europe experienced lower attendance this year because of the global recession, and Miami is no different.

"When a person has to pay \$12 . . . of course, they have to choose which films they will see," she says. "Instead of five, maybe they are going to see only three."

At Miami Art Museum, attendance has fluctuated since the fall, says Terry Riley, executive director.



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In October, MAM attendance measured about 4,700, compared to about 3,700 for the same month last year, Riley says. November attendance was about 3,400, or about 1,200 fewer than the same month last year. December saw 7,700 visitors to MAM, compared to 6,900 in December 2007.

Attendance for January and February attendance was lower than the same period in 2008.

"It depends completely on what we're showing," Riley says of the fluctuation, explaining that recent exhibitions were more challenging than crowd-pleasing.

"We're not attendance obsessed," Riley says. "We want to see improvement. We want to reach more people. But we're not willing to throw the whole program into a kind of mass-marketing mode where our

only obsession is getting more people in the door."

## BARGAIN PRICES

Still, Riley says MAM's attendance should be relatively safe from the recession because the price of admission is reasonable.

"We cost \$8, and there's not much in this town that a family can do or somebody who's conscious about money can do for \$8," he says.

Low prices and a good dose of experimentation are part of the formula for New World Symphony's uptick in attendance, says Craig Hall, vice president of communications.

Since fall, New World has sold \$129,900 in tickets for performances at Miami Beach's Lincoln Theater — a 2 percent increase over the previous same period — without raising ticket prices.

The orchestra has

attempted to draw audiences by testing new concepts with a series dubbed "Symphony with a Splash" and a set of concerts titled "\$2.50" — as in the price of admission.

"Symphony with a Splash" concerts last one hour and are accompanied by video projections and interaction with the conductor. Concerts are followed by a cocktail reception where musicians mingle with patrons.

The "\$2.50" concerts, first tested in the fall, work like this: One concert of three to four pieces of music, lasting about 30 minutes, is presented three times in one night at a cost of \$2.50 per show.

Hall says New World hopes these types of presentations will make classical music relevant to new audiences "by trying to reach out to people who don't usually go."

"Basically, it's just meant to draw people off of Lincoln Road," Hall says, "because Lincoln Road is such a big attractor of people."

The first "\$2.50" concert sold "very well," Hall says, attracting 300 to 400 people for each performance. New World plans to offer a second "\$2.50" concert series in April.

Another organization experimenting with new activities for audiences is Rhythm Foundation, which presents concerts by world music artists.

Executive director Laura Quinlan says the group, which recently marked its 20th anniversary, has supplemented its presentations with free activities for audiences, such as listening parties, film screenings and concerts in Bayfront Park.

"It's really a way for us to meet new audiences," Quinlan says of the events.

The free concerts in Bayfront Park, which are underwritten by the Downtown Development Authority and a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, have attracted hundreds of people.

Quinlan believes the concerts are getting a particularly good reception because they feature "world-class local artists," she says, but also because of the economic recession.

"If we had been doing a free show in downtown Miami last year," she says, "we would have had maybe 20 people, because free used to mean no good. But now free means great value."

Quinlan says she will know by the end of April whether free events also mean more paying audiences.