

Festival of Women and the Arts Strives to Continue Growth

Written by Jeff Ignatius
Tuesday, 25 April 2006 18:00

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In discussing the Quad Cities' inaugural Venus Envy last year, festival chair Rachael Mullins said she hoped to draw between 300 and 500 people. Mallarie Zimmer, the founder of Venus Envy who has spread her celebration of women and the arts from St. Louis in 1999 to four cities today, aimed higher: 500 to 1,000 people, she said. Zimmer's organization aims to "champion ... women's artistic, civic, and creative pursuits in communities along the Mississippi River and beyond," according to its Web site.

But the first event at the Bucktown Center for the Arts (225 East Second Street in Davenport) drew an estimated 1,200 people. And anybody who was there will tell you that it was shoulder-to-shoulder most of the night.

As much as the numbers surprised and pleased organizers, Mullins also marveled at the diversity of the crowd – a function of the event's broad scope and the variety of female artists it brought together. "It wasn't just who you would see at a normal gallery show, or a folk duo," she said.

Even if Saturday's Venus Envy event tops last year's attendance, though – and Mullins is hoping for between 1,500 and 2,000 people – expect the event to be more comfortable. While the debut was confined to Bucktown's first floor, with a single entrance, because of construction, the 2006 edition will cover three floors and have two entrances. "The facility is so different," Mullins said. "It was overly full last year. ... The larger venue is really allowing us to do more."

While last year's event featured 40 visual artists, this year's will have 58, spread over the display areas on the three floors and in the MidCoast Fine Arts gallery. A larger number of artists responded to the call for entries, said Program Director Melissa Coulter, and "we're drawing from a much larger area."

Twelve performing artists or groups – from musicians to actors to dancers – and a fashion show will be featured on two stages throughout the event, which is free and runs from 6 to 10

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p.m. The Midwest Writing Center will offer the interactive “Venus graffiti.”

And a video installation on the third floor will both celebrate last year’s event and record thoughts and feelings about the second go-around. The project started with a poem written by Lisa Bonar that was sent to organizers the day after last year’s event. The installation will feature recitations of the poem by Venus Envy organizers and was created by Marla Alvarado Neuerburg, last year’s program director and a member of the steering committee this year.

The video installation will also feature a “video testimonial area,” in which people at the event will be able to recite the poem themselves or record their thoughts about the event.

Coulter said that the planning process for Venus Envy has been much longer – and therefore “much more relaxed” – than last year’s. “We planned everything in about three months” last year, she said. Another benefit is that Bucktown is in “a much more finished state.”

Zimmer’s national Venus Envy organization – which has helped get events off the ground in Memphis and Baton Rouge in addition to St. Louis and the Quad Cities – contributed \$1,500 for last year’s event. But Mullins said this year’s festivities won’t require that seed money. Zimmer said last year that the organization hopes that events are self-sufficient in their third year, but the Quad Cities could reach that level this year. Last year’s local Venus Envy event garnered roughly \$2,000 in donations at the festival itself, Mullins said.

Unlike in other Venus Envy cities, organizers in the Quad Cities are intent on maintaining a free event. Mullins also said that she doesn’t want to spread Venus Envy activities over several days, as it is in St. Louis. “I’d hate to see us segment the audience,” she said, noting the energy of a one-evening gathering.

She noted that the Venus Envy art exhibit at Bucktown will remain up until May 26, giving people who can’t make the event the opportunity to experience its visual artistry. “It’s also more value for the artists who participate,” Coulter said.

But Venus Envy could grow too big for Bucktown, and Mullins said she’s not averse to seeing it spill out into the neighborhood. “There’s a lot of room to grow not only in the building but the neighborhood,” she said.

For more information on Venus Envy, visit <http://www.venusenvy.org> or call (309)738-0988.

Venus Envy Performance Schedule

Sophia Stage

6 p.m.: Mona Ritemon

6:45 p.m.: *Another Day at the Park, or the Mostly Fictional Life of Lisbeth Edgeworth Welborn,*

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Part I (original musical theatre by Cathy and Jerry Wetzel)

7:35 p.m.: Danelle Callahan

8:05 p.m.: SASS!

8:55 p.m.: Lori & Jeri (comedy)

9:25 p.m.: Carla Hall

Hera Stage

6:20 p.m.: Troupe Rakset al-Nehri & the Ancient Rhythms Dance Ensemble

6:55 p.m.: *Rosie* (performance piece by Two Girls & an Audience)

7:30 p.m.: Ballet Quad Cities II

8 p.m.: Hersong

8:50 p.m.: Zloti Village Chorus

9:30 p.m.: Fashion Show

9:45 p.m.: Tribal Attitude (belly dancing)