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Activist art

Amnesty International Human Rights Art Festival takes over downtown Silver Spring

story by Karen Schafer | Staff Writer

Community activist Nadine Bloch insists that "all good political work is good theater." And to that end, artist and political activist Tom Block is producing the mother of all endeavors, the Amnesty International Human Rights Art Festival. Some 400 artists will participate in 200 free events taking place Friday through Sunday throughout downtown Silver Spring.

Fortunately, the festival will have something for everyone from the diehard activist to the just-wanna-have-fun bunch. Events will include scores of films, music, dance and theatrical productions, visual art exhibitions, panel discussions, workshops on topics as diverse as "protest movement skills" and puppet making, and even decorating "cupcakes for human rights" for children. Organizers have created opportunities to "kaffee klatsch" about weighty issues, whether at formal panel discussions or standing on a soapbox in the Pyramid Atlantic Arts Center parking lot. If the sheer magnitude of events seems a little too much, participants can unwind at the Mediation Museum.

Regardless of the artistic merit, a cohesive thread runs through the festival, with participants making "statements about Amnesty International's themes of human rights and justice for all," Block explains. He hopes at least "100,000" people drop by for the "humor, pathos and serious stuff" he and his volunteer festival staff have spent the last year planning.

The Silver Spring resident knows he could have easily chosen a few select events and called it a day, but he wants "the audience to look at the schedule and become upset that they can't see it all." Besides, he believes "creating something like this is unprecedented."

Block gets downright surly when it is suggested that there may be too many options.

"I didn't lard this up with a bunch of junk," he says.

Hollywood star power will come in the form of "All in the Family" creator Norman Lear, named the festival's executive producer. While Lear will not attend, he financed the five original works by California-based poet-comedian Steve Connell will perform during the weekend.

Connell knows that for most Americans, the idea of listening to poetry is tantamount to parents telling their children to "eat your vegetables." But he searches for ways to use words that will ignite his audience's enthusiasm for a subject. He recalls the time he was asked to write a poem about habeas corpus to a group of attorneys. "While the term is at the heart of American's legal system," he says that at first his audience was unresponsive, but while he played with the language, they "erupted with excitement as the term suddenly came alive with meaning."

So many possibilities

Movie producer Jerry Blumenthal will show his film, "Prisoner of her Past," which chronicles a Holocaust survivor's late-onset post-traumatic stress disorder. The little-known, extremely debilitating illness pushed the elderly woman into the realm of delusion in 2001 after her husband died.

"Knowing about this late-onset disorder is important for the future generations of children who may have suffered through Hurricane Katrina or other early childhood traumatic events," the Chicago-based producer explains. The film will be shown at 5:45 p.m. at City Place Theater II.

Along with films, numerous theater productions will take center stage, including "Red Hood: Once Upon a Wartime." The adaptation of "Little Red Riding Hood," using puppets, actors, pantomime and spoken text, focuses on the plight of children in zones of conflict. It will be shown at 3:30 p.m. Sunday at the Montgomery College Theater.

Dance productions are planned, both inside theatrical spaces, with the J. Chen Project performing at 3:30 p.m. Saturday at Montgomery College, while a "flash mob dance," led by the Liz Lehrman Dance Company with Dance Metro DC, will start at 3:30 p.m. Sunday at Ellsworth Plaza.

An anti-violence against women conference with eight women sharing their stories and answering questions will be presented from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday at City Place Theater I. The conference is designed to raise awareness of the national epidemic of violence against women.

The idea of a festival began more than a year ago when Block learned that 25 percent of the U.S.-based Amnesty International staff had been laid off. Disturbed by this fact, Block wanted to showcase an organization that "advocates for the quintessential American values of human rights and justice for all, those that are enshrined in the Constitution of the United States."

He concluded that creating the human rights art festival will help Amnesty International as well as contribute to revitalizing Silver Spring's downtown. Booths will be set up throughout Silver Spring, offering folks information about Amnesty International and an opportunity to become a member for \$35 a year.

Of course, Folabi Olagbaju, Amnesty International's Mid-Atlantic regional director, is thrilled with this collaboration. Integrating art within Amnesty International's mission has been going on since its 1961 inception.

"Artists of all disciplines have been at the forefront of support for the global advocacy and campaigning efforts of Amnesty International. These include internationally renowned artists like Pablo Picasso. Artists have always valued the political freedoms Amnesty International works to protect as an integral condition of their creative expression," Olagbaju notes.

Her own story

Painter Elsa Gebreyesus could easily have assimilated into American life, but a trip to her native Eritrea, after its independence from Ethiopia in 1993, changed that possibility forever. It was a heady time for the burgeoning country bounded by Sudan, Ethiopia and the Red Sea.

"Obtaining [Eritrea's] independence was like David fighting Goliath with Ethiopia getting its support from the Soviet Union," Gebreyesus remembers.

During this honeymoon period, anything was possible, with Gebreyesus coming to help with women's issues. By the time she left, four years after Eritrea achieved independence, she was deeply disappointed. She witnessed high ranking officials who pleaded for democracy landing in jail. Returning to the U.S., she was disturbed when ex-patriot friends avoided even discussing the subject. At this point, she decided to harness that pain in some of her abstract expressionist paintings.

On view at Pyramid Atlantic, these works are designed to show the complex emotions the painter feels for her native country as well as for all countries facing dictatorial regimes.

The festival promises to be both sobering and uplifting, and Block hopes that visitors will embrace activist artists and see how both artists and their audiences "can cause social transformation."

The Human Rights Art Festival is planned for Friday through Sunday throughout downtown Silver Spring. Admission is free. A schedule of events will be available each day at participating venues and online at www.humanrightsartfestival.com.