



Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción, a community agency, has built a wider audience for Latin jazz, theater and arts in the last four years.

REACHING IS BELIEVING

When arts organizations extend a knowing hand to their community members and understand neighborhood history, accessibility becomes part of their success. And the MetLife/Arts Presenters Award offers a round of applause.

BY DAN VERGANO

A kind word, a friendly smile, even the right beer, can open doors once closed to the arts, says Javier Torres, director of Boston's Villa Victoria Center for the Arts, formerly called Casa de la Cultura/Center for Latino Arts.

"One lady I wanted to come to a gallery opening, I learned she really liked Heineken," says Torres. "Usually we have Corona, but if that's what she likes, that's what we'll have. It's really simple stuff, but I saw her there."

Just such "simple stuff" — along with affordable performances, expanded youth education and gallery exhibits — has allowed the center, a program of the Inquilinos Boricuas en Accion community agency, to build a wider audience for its Latin jazz, theater and arts offerings in the last four years. Local students get their own professionally promoted art shows and partnerships have sprung up with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Berklee College of Music.

"I can't deny it's exhausting," Torres says. "But if you believe in reaching out to audiences, you really can do it."

Building audiences among the underserved, underprivileged and ignored garnered the center and two other organizations this year's Arts Presenters / MetLife Foundation Awards for art access. The center and ASU Gammage, the university-based performance center at Arizona State University in Tempe, won the 2009 Award for Increasing Arts Access in Underserved Communities. And Paper Mill



Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey has pursued accessibility since the mid-1980s, with programs for the blind, assisted listening and interpreted productions such as *The Miracle Worker*.

Playhouse in Millburn, N.J., won the 2009 Award for Excellence and Innovation in Art Access.

The awardees, chosen by an expert panel from a field of more than 35 applicants, received \$10,000 each to help further their efforts. The awards were made in January at the Association of Performing Arts Presenters conference in New York.

“Audience is everything, that’s the reality for all of these organizations,” said Rohit Burman, culture program manager at the MetLife Foundation. “For the foundation, the arts are about enriching communities, and an important part that the arts play in life is in offering access to everyone.”

ASU Gammage won for its Cultural Participation Program, a 15-year effort to bridge divides in language, culture and age that separate the university center from its surroundings. The program has sharpened its focus in the last seven years to 11 projects, “aimed at communities that might have avoided this huge state university campus before,” says Michael Reed, the program’s senior director.

All of the artists in residency programs make connections to communities, working everywhere from a women’s prison — the Journey Home program — to the student lounge at ASU, where current resident musician

Quetzal Guerrero might surprise students with an informal performance. Plays that have tackled the subjects of Japanese-Americans interned during World War II and the fates of Latino war veterans, says Reed, “have really brought us into communities, so we’re not this closed and foreboding place at the university.”

At Paper Mill Playhouse, a statewide partnership with the New Jersey Theatre Alliance, has allowed the theater to spread the lessons and resources — equipment, audio-describers and marketing — of a theater nimbly staying ahead of Broadway venues only 15 miles away by offering access to audiences.

“We had open-captioning to follow dialogues and lyrics even before Broadway,” says Michael Mooney, outreach and access manager at Paper Mill. The theater has pursued accessibility since the mid-1980s, with programs for the blind and assisted listening.

One of Paper Mill’s signature programs, Sensory Seminars, lets blind audience members visit sets and touch costumes before plays. It started with one 1987 production of the musical *My One and Only*. The seminars have become so popular that the theater has to turn away the sighted who want to take the tour, Mooney says.



Artists in residency programs at ASU make connections to communities, from a women's prison – the Journey Home program [above] – to the ASU student lounge.

The goal of the Met Life/Arts Presenters access awards, now in their fifth year, is to recognize leaders in opening the arts to underserved audiences, says Sandra Gibson, president and CEO of Arts Presenters. “This year’s awardees are exemplars in the field and represent the breadth of organizations who have embraced a leadership role in accessibility through the arts.”

Case studies of the award-winning efforts are available at www.artspresenters.org, so the lessons learned from their efforts can help inspire and guide other organizations.

The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act requires businesses to make “reasonable modifications” to accommodate the 50 million people nationwide with disabilities, according to the federal Department of Justice. Merely complying with the law on access is “a work in progress in our field,” Gibson says. “Arts organizations need to go beyond simple renovations, upgrades and discounted ticket programs. Innovation in programming and marketing are needed to reach all community members.”

Partnerships have been the key to success for all three of this year’s award winners. The Villa Victoria Center has joined *The Best of Boston* consortium aimed at drawing tourists off the city’s Freedom Trail and into the city’s Chinatown, Roxbury and Villa Victoria minority neighborhoods. Among ASU Gammage’s partners are Broadway producers, other universities and Latino veterans whose memories led to James Garcia’s 2006 play *Voices of Valor*, recounting the experiences of combat veterans in World War II and discrimination at home. In 2000, Japanese-American co-producers helped fund a play, *Gila River*, about another side of World War II: the internment camps that were only three miles south of Phoenix.

“Partners are out there,” Torres says. “But they have to be real partnerships and that means giving up some control. But that’s the only way that it will work.”

Even foundations not typically associated with the arts may look favorably on funding efforts to help people with disabilities or underserved communities, says Paper Mill’s Mooney. “Here’s the secret: all our efforts are funded. If I had to pay for this myself, we would only be able to do things on request, when we could,” he says. “But people will look for ways to help where they see it helping their community.”



Real partnerships are the key to building successful audience events such as a Mexican dance troupe with Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción.