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48-hour arty people

by Eric Gallippo

As of 5 p.m. Friday, Michigan State University's first Arts Marathon Weekend will be underway. Over the following 48 hours, students and locals will have their pick of more than 90 arts and cultural events on campus hosted by more than 40 MSU organizations. From Israeli folk dancing to Russian film, student art to fashion designs and educational workshops to video games, something should be happening at any given moment. Some groups have even chosen to take the marathon challenge to heart, offering continuous film screenings, readings and theater productions for one or two full days.

The massive event is an unofficial capper to MSU's "Year of Arts and Culture" that organizers began plotting a year ago to highlight the university's cultural offerings. Rob Roznowski, associate theater professor at MSU, developed the idea for the marathon and put the program together with the help of volunteers.

While the lineup is impressive, Roznowski hopes visitors will realize it extends beyond these two days. "On any given weekend, at least half of this is going on," he says.

Despite a steady schedule of art, music, poetry, theater and more throughout the school year, Roznowski says students rarely take advantage of the opportunity to see a show, take in a play or browse an exhibit.

"We've been meeting about this," he says. "How do we foster a younger audience on campus?"

And it's not just an MSU problem.

"We're connected with other Big 10 universities," Roznowski says. "They are going through the same thing."

To attract younger audiences, the weekend's festivities will also feature pop culture experiences, including an evening of Michigan indie-rock bands, late night "Guitar Hero" sessions and an afternoon karaoke jam.

Roznowski also hopes the weekend will draw more local residents onto campus, like during MSU's Summer Circle Theatre program.

"Community-wise, there is that wall between it and the campus," he says.

Family programming includes children's activities Saturday and Sunday morning, art projects at the Kresge Museum Saturday afternoon and German lessons for kids Sunday afternoon.

With so many home entertainment options today, Roznowski understands that taking a chance on a live production is more of an investment than say, queuing up one's Netflix account.

"Going to the theater ... when it's good, it's better than anything, but when it's bad it's painful," he says.

In addition to inviting the community to check out what's happening on campus, a crew of artists and advocates will rally at the State Capitol Saturday at noon, where Rep. Mark Meadows, D-East Lansing, is to deliver a proclamation celebrating MSU's commitment to the arts and the important role the arts play in mid-Michigan.

Although it will mark the one-year anniversary of a rally held in response to a state freeze of grant payments to arts and cultural groups, Roznowski said the event isn't meant to be antagonistic.

"It's not really angry, it's celebratory," he says.

Back on campus, Roznowski says regardless of who shows up this weekend, just putting the program together has been a boon to MSU's arts scene by spurring new collaborations between departments. "If nothing else, it's helped our separate areas come together," he says.

As examples, Roznowski said the Theatre Department will team up with MSU video game designers next year for a modernized take on the rock opera "Tommy" (think "Nintendo" in place of "Pinball" wizard) and with the German department on a production of "Cabaret."

The university has also developed a new Web site, www.artsandculture.msu.edu, where visitors can explore MSU arts events across disciplines.

While Roznowski sees getting the word out about the arts at MSU as important, he also stresses the university's role in educating students and visitors alike. Over the weekend, visitors will not only be able to take in concerts, like the jazz spectacular, but also take part in workshops on jazz music. While "Avenue Q" and "Babes in Arms" will take the stage at night, visitors can learn to make puppets and paint sets during the day.

"If you look at the breadth of what's around here, there's no way you could leave here without being entertained and have learned something," Roznowski says.

Arts Marathon Weekend

5 p.m. Friday – 5 p.m. Sunday

MSU campus

Prices and locations vary

Full schedule with details available at www.cal.msu.edu/ArtsMarathon2008.php