

A spate of national grants brightens the artistic outlook for 2015

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The coming year is shaping up to be a happy one for a host of Western New York arts groups, thanks to a year-end infusion of cash from Uncle Sam and a sunnier-than-average outlook on the local funding front.

In late December, Squeaky Wheel, the pint-sized media arts center [preparing to open its new location in the Market Arcade Building \(http://www.buffalonews.com/gusto/art/squeaky-wheel-leaves-behind-speakeasy-vibe-in-move-to-market-arcade-20141129\)](http://www.buffalonews.com/gusto/art/squeaky-wheel-leaves-behind-speakeasy-vibe-in-move-to-market-arcade-20141129), announced that it had received \$100,000 from the Andy Warhol Foundation for its 2015 programming.

[Young Audiences of Western New York \(http://buffalonews.com/columns/colin-dabkowski/after-50-years-young-audiences-finds-ways-to-stay-alive-20141221\)](http://buffalonews.com/columns/colin-dabkowski/after-50-years-young-audiences-finds-ways-to-stay-alive-20141221), in tandem with Friends of the Buffalo Story and the City of Buffalo, got another \$100,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts for [an ambitious project \(http://www.buffalonews.com/life-arts/telling-the-story-of-buffalo-through-a-single-street-20141024\)](http://www.buffalonews.com/life-arts/telling-the-story-of-buffalo-through-a-single-street-20141024) highlighting the culture and history of West Ferry Street.

In its latest round of granting, the NEA also doled out \$70,000 to Buffalo-based groups: \$15,000 each to the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and White Pine Press; \$10,000 to the Irish Classical Theatre Company for its collaboration with Torn Space Theater and LehrerDance on a new interpretation of William Butler Yeats' poetry; and \$30,000 to CEPA Gallery for a public art project that will create up to 10 installations by local and national artists on Buffalo's West Side.

"We're seeing that there's greater recognition for the quality of work happening," said Tod A. Kniazuk, the executive director of Buffalo's Arts Services Initiative. "We're seeing that on a national stage, they belong, and I think that speaks well for the argument we've been making: That it takes an ecosystem, and that all organizations are valuable."

At the same time, at least in Erie County, local funding for arts groups [will tick up slightly in 2015 \(http://buffalo.com/2014/12/09/news/art/2015-will-good-year-erie-county-cultural-groups/\)](http://buffalo.com/2014/12/09/news/art/2015-will-good-year-erie-county-cultural-groups/) thanks to a legislature friendlier to arts and culture than any in recent memory. And local philanthropies such as the Community Foundation, the Oishei Foundation and the consortium of groups that make up the Fund for the Arts, continue to provide much-needed money for operations and programming to groups large and small throughout the region. As do continued state-level grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and, perhaps most hearteningly, the Western New York Regional Economic Development Council.

For Irish Classical Theatre Company co-founder and artistic director Vincent O'Neill, the \$10,000 grant his organization received from the NEA is about much more than money or a single artistic project. It's about something much more valuable: recognition and leverage.

"It puts Buffalo on the map and it's taken seriously that there are companies here that operate on level that is considered adequately high in terms of profile and quality to get national recognition," he said. "And it's leverage for other funding. So if you're a local foundation, you say, oh boy, the NEA or NYSCA at the state level funded this organization, it immediately gives you validity."

The recent spate of grants, especially on the national level, is not a sign that all is rosy and bright in the cultural funding world. Most organizations still must fight to raise the hard-to-come-by operational money they use to pay the rent and utility bills and constantly tinker with their programming to boost the amount of earned income they can pull in.

Executive directors too often do double-duty as artistic directors, spending the majority of their time fundraising and too little of it exercising their artistic, directorial or curatorial talents.

So, if 2015 is looking like it will be sunnier than average for nonprofit arts groups, it's worth noting that "average" means overcast and threatening to rain.

Arts groups, under the leadership of the increasingly effective Arts Services Initiative and the collection of cultural warriors known as the Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance, must press as hard as ever in their difficult quest to convince foundations, governments and skeptical citizens that they're a worthwhile investment.

Even so, the increased attention the region's culture is getting from national foundations can only be a positive sign.

"Buffalo is on the map nationally now," O'Neill said. "The higher the profile Buffalo has as a city, the better chance we have of securing that kind of national recognition."

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