

# *Set Apart, Drawn Together:* The New York Stake Arts Festival

BY **MARIN LEGGAT, COORDINATOR**

*Marin is a choreographer, modern dancer, instructor, and founder and director of the company M.E.L.D. Danceworks. Also see our interview with her on page 72.*

Winter 2008: I'm sitting in sacrament meeting in my ward in uptown Manhattan, listening to strains of the opening hymn fill our chapel. Our numbers are not as large as Salt Lake City wards, but man, can this ward sing! I'm surrounded by professional opera singers, Broadway performers, musicians, dancers, writers, and artists. The song of the righteous is a prayer, and this morning, the prayer fills the air with zeal, faith, and near-perfect pitch.

Politics and religion are in the air this morning, too, with the recent passing of Prop 8 in California, the resulting protests at LDS temples—including our own Manhattan temple—and the diverse range of opinions and concerns being expressed within the LDS community.

I'm thinking about my own work as artistic director of M.E.L.D. Danceworks, a modern dance company committed to “dissolving religious and cultural barriers through the art of dance.” I've just begun rehearsals for a new project with a cast of interfaith dancers exploring the foundations of our spirituality. Rehearsals thus far have been part dancing, part discussion, part debate about current events surrounding politics and “the Mormons.”

Winter 2008 was a time of reflection, uneasiness and reconciliation for me as an LDS dance artist living in New York City.

Around this time, I suggested to a friend that our stake present an arts festival. The last arts festival presented by the New York, New

York Stake had been held in 2001. I wasn't alone in feeling the need at this particular time and place to step forward, open our doors, and say, "This is who we are! This is what we do! Come see!"

The three-day festival, *Set Apart, Drawn Together*, was held April 30–May 2, 2009 in the Lincoln Square Building on 65<sup>th</sup> and Columbus in midtown Manhattan. The festival showcased the work of over 100 LDS artists in all disciplines of visual, literary, and performing arts. Major events involved a film festival, dance concert, classical concert, musical theatre showcase, visual arts display, and children's concert. Each of these events had its own team of coordinators and curators working under the direction of President Buckner and Nathan Bowen, a coordinating member of the high council and a composer completing a PhD in music composition from the CUNY Graduate Center.

In addition to major events, classes for adults and children were taught by experts in the field. Children worked alongside professionals to compose original songs, draw objects in 3D, and take creative movement classes. For adults, classes such as Writings of C.S. Lewis, Drawing the Human Figure, Opera for Beginners, Indoor Photography, and Jive Dancing were offered. Panels on timely topics like "Arts and the Economy" provided resources and networking opportunities for LDS artists in the stake.

Living the life of an artist in NYC is not easy. Some work day jobs to support families while auditioning, others juggle multiple jobs to pay rent, and some finance their own art — whether it be writing, choreography, theatre, or painting — while waiting for the next commission to come through. For five months, I watched as these artists stepped forward to give a

little more in order to assist in the missionary and fellowship aims of the festival: extra rehearsals requiring more evenings away from family; time spent curating, collecting, and properly hanging original artwork; and donations from individuals like Rich Bishop, who provided the Marley floor, lighting equipment, and manpower necessary to transform the floor of the cultural hall into a thirty-five by forty foot stage, complete with side lighting and a sound board.

It was important to festival organizers that LDS artists working and living in Manhattan come to know, associate with, and support each other. Through the festival, the New York Artists Network was established to assist LDS artists wishing to network and collaborate across disciplines.

The work of LDS artists was recognized and celebrated by members of the stake and community over this three-day event. *Set Apart, Drawn Together* also provided artists of other faiths opportunities to share their talents with our stake members. The indie-folk trio Pearl and the Beard, including Inwood First Ward member Emily Price, performed a forty-five minute set, and the Handcart Ensemble, under the direction of Scott Reynolds, performed a reading of *Odyssey*, a production that would eventually go on to a successful off-Broadway run.

The arts play an important role in building bridges of understanding among diverse groups of people. In a city as diverse as New York City, LDS artists can help create opportunities to share ideas and build respect among our neighbors.

*Set Apart, Drawn Together* set a precedent for future arts festivals that will continue shedding positive light on the Church and its members. ■

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