

Outdoor arts festival on the move from village streets to cyberspace

Regina Leader-Post 4 Apr 2020 ASHLEY MARTIN



For the past decade, artist Gerald Saul has hosted the Yellow Art Garage with Margaret Bessai (not pictured) during the Cathedral Village Arts Festival. As the annual non-profit event moves to digital this May, due to COVID-19, Saul says he is finding new ways to connect to the audience.

Gerald Saul sees reaching people as the biggest challenge to transforming one of Regina's largest annual events into a digital affair.

For the Cathedral Village Arts Festival's 29th year, the multidisciplinary arts celebration is adapting due to bans on gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Usually running in venues throughout the Cathedral neighbourhood, in 2020 the festival is aiming to move online from May 18 to 23.

Who performs and when — and how that show will find an audience — all remain to be seen.

"We're currently addressing all different avenues of what it's going to take in order to bring this all online," said festival board chair Jefferson Wourms.

That includes finding community partners to assist with developing the technology, including redeveloping the non-profit group's website.

For the past decade, artist and filmmaker Saul has hosted a popup art gallery in his garage during the festival, along with his wife, artist Margaret Bessai.

For them, as creators, the festival may not be that much different.

"I'm not feeling isolated at all, I've got my technology, I've got my computer, I've got my books, I've got all my tools and everything. I'm creating away," Saul said.

But “finding the right hook to make sure that people actually look at” festival performances is the bigger challenge.

“When you turn on your TV and your computer, you have lots of choices.”

An important aspect of any festival is connection, added Saul, and “seeing something that you wouldn’t see otherwise.

“With the Cathedral festival, the great thing about it is that this whole big thing is set up around getting people out on the street to see work and talk to artists and see crafts and buy crafts, right?

“So the challenge will be to make sure the audience ... knows there’s things going on that are going to be live, that you have to tune into Skype or Zoom or whatever it might be, or Facebook or something, at this specific time, or you’re going to miss it.”

Andres Davalos is used to playing for a big audience.

For the past few years, his band Andino Suns has performed in the Holy Rosary Park tent during the Cathedral festival.

“It’s packed and it’s awesome. The energy is great,” Davalos said.

He’s open to trying an online performance, although “I’m not a techie cause I’m like from the ’90s.”

But he wonders how a concert performance might unfold for a group with five members — whether they’ll maintain social distance in one room, or figure out a way to each perform from their own home and stream together.

“I don’t know what the format would look like, but I can envision some pretty cool setups,” Davalos said.

“The youth, the young kids that are going to be gigging here, I bet they’re going to come up with some cool, innovative ideas to hook up with their buddies online.”

Wourms said other people are sharing Davalos’s concern.

“The larger (groups) obviously can’t get together to practise or they can’t get together to actually put on the show,” he said.

“We’ve received a lot of positive feedback from general attendees, the folks who will be coming, saying they’re looking forward to it, and looking forward to seeing what we can pull off.”

Wourms said he did consider cancelling, but there’s enough “upsetting news” these days.

“I thought — with the technology that we have, that’s out there — we could pull off something that gives folks something to look forward to,” Wourms said.

He isn’t sure whether multiple events will happen concurrently, as usual, or they’ll be limited to one performance at a time.

He hopes to host a virtual parade, because a parade kicks off the festival on Victoria Day Monday each year.

A street fair usually caps off the festival on the following Saturday. That usually involves hundreds of arts-and-crafts and food vendors selling their wares, and buskers performing, turning 13th Avenue and adjacent streets into a high-traffic pedestrian zone.

That obviously won’t happen this year due to social distancing.

The festival charges vendor fees for the street fair in a bid to keep festival admission free each year.

To compensate for some of the loss, the fest is hosting an online 50/50 through Echolotto.

The lottery will go live at arts5050.ca.