



Art Royale... A Courtly Celebration

Now in its fourth year, this interactive performance art event is like a home-grown mini-Mardi Gras

by **Janina Birtolo**

In the world of art, you expect to find creativity and imagination. But one annual Southwest Florida art event takes those simple expectations and sends them soaring.

Art Royale is the major annual fundraiser for the Lee County Alliance for the Arts. It is also an event unlike any other.

This virtual extravaganza of the arts brings together artists of all disciplines to demonstrate such diverse pursuits as fire dancing and music making, graffiti art and fashion design, acting, comedy, and sculpting—and that's just a small sample. There are also a half dozen or more local restaurants serving up tastes of their most tempting dishes, video

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screens projecting films and light shows, and an after-hours dance party. With all that goes on, it's no wonder Art Royale has become *the* art event of the year. Not bad for something with such a humble origin.

"This is the fourth year for Art Royale," says Louise Senneff, executive director of the Alliance. "Aida Bukovika had the original idea, based on the street fairs she'd seen in Barcelona. She wanted to have an interactive performance art event that would be different from anything Lee County had ever seen."

Bukovika mounted the first Royale nearly single-handedly, but eventually a committee coalesced around the idea. In 2005, local architect Bruce Gora and Will Prather, owner of the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre, served as co-chairs. This year, those posts are held by local attorney Jane Lane and Brad Newton, co-owner of Target Builders. The event has grown every year, and Senneff expects this year to be bigger and flashier than ever.



Giant aluminum dragonflies, backlit with neon, decorated last year's Art Royale.

Although every Art Royale is based on the same general idea, a distinct theme is chosen each year to which all activities are loosely tied. In 2005, for instance, the theme was "Take Flight." Upon arriving, guests were given a "boarding pass" that listed the various events and participants. After watching an orientation video, the guests walked

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Aerialists, fashion shows, and winged artwork leant visual emphasis to the “Take Flight” theme of the 2006 Art Royale, while attendees, many dressed as fairies, flight attendants, and even Mary Poppins, joined in on the fun.

between fabric walls, erected for the event, onto the campus.

Among the most eye-catching exhibits were the ten foot-long, solid-cast aluminum dragonflies created by Steve Swenor and James Sauter. These perched all over the exterior walls of the main building, artfully backlit by neon, and were auctioned off at the end of the evening.

Other artists worked on a smaller scale. Teri Aldred helped partygoers decorate mosaic tiles that eventually became part of a fountain on the grounds. Silk artist Chari Mooradian guided efforts to create filmy, wispy paintings on silk. Lisa Geersten and Nichole Worthman designed an oversized ceramic heart dubbed *Release Your Heavy Heart*. Those who wanted to do just that were encouraged to write troubles on a slip of paper and place them inside the heart. The papers were later ceremonially burned.

Inside the Alliance’s main building, the space normally used for traditional exhibitions was transformed into a cabaret. There, guests were treated to a presentation by “Amelia Earhart,” flight-centered comedy routines, and a humorous, thought-provoking mono-

logue about gravity and levity, presented by Emily Levine—who traveled from Los Angeles just to be part of the event. On the outdoor stage, fire dancers and aerialists put on their shows. Meanwhile, all around the campus, musicians rocked and soothed, fashion shows strutted, and revelers (many dressed as fairies, flight attendants, pilots, and even one as Mary Poppins) ate, drank, appreciated, and made merry.

The theme for the 2006 Art Royale is “Metamorphosis,” which is very fitting considering the transformation that takes place on the Alliance campus. But co-chairs Lane and Newton hope to take the idea even further.

“The reason for choosing ‘Metamorphosis’ is that the whole community is changing,” Lane explains. “The downtown skyline is changing and we have all this growth, as well as the changes brought by the [recent] hurricanes. The arts community is also changing—at the Alliance itself. They are trying to become a broader umbrella for the arts. Even personal transformation is part of it.”

To help set the tone for this theme,

large hanging chrysalises, lit from within, will be scattered around the campus. Computer stations will let partygoers see how they might look with different clothes or a new hairstyle. A dramatic fashion show is planned, and Lane even hopes to enlist the help of FPL to make the metamorphosis from day into night more magical. And, of course, there will be artists and performers throughout the grounds, as well as the same sumptuous samplings from area restaurants.

“We talked a lot about how to keep the same format of so many things happening at once,” Lane says. “We decided that’s the beauty of the event. It’s what makes it very high energy. But we’re working on communications throughout the campus, so everyone knows what’s going on where and when.”

Last year, Art Royale attracted close to one thousand people and raised approximately \$75,000 for the Alliance. And that was despite a change of date due to Hurricane Wilma. True to the magic of the event, almost all the artists were still able to participate. For this year organizers decided to pick a hurricane-safer date in November from

the start, and Senneff expects the evening will prove to be even more popular.

“Everyone who comes loves it because it is so different,” Senneff says. “It’s not like anything else in the area. We are providing the community with a really cutting-edge event.”

Art Royale 2006 takes place on November 18. To help spread the spirit, costumes are encouraged. For more information or to order tickets, visit www.artroyale2006.com. For further information call Alliance for the Arts at 239-939-2787 or visit www.artinlee.org.

Janina Birtolo is a freelance writer for Times of the Islands.

Another chance to experience the arts...

Art Royale isn’t the only opportunity to experience area arts offered by the Lee County Alliance for the Arts this fall. In October, the organization hosts a “Walk Through the Arts” day.



Walk Thru The Arts

“The idea behind this event is to expose the community to what’s available,” explains Louise Senneff, executive director of the Alliance. “We ask the various arts organizations to participate, and every one has its own table. We have performances on the stages. And artists will be doing demonstrations all over the campus. It’s a family event and a very non-threatening exposure to what’s out there.”

Walk Through the Arts is held from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on October 21. For more information call the Alliance for the Arts at 239-939-2787 or visit www.artinlee.org.

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