

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS ART FESTIVAL



Left: Cate Clark Dance Company; center: Farm Arts Collective PHOTOS BY DANNY BOYD

Tribal Baroque PHOTO BY STEVEN PISANO

BY LARRY DEAN HARRIS

Tom Block isn't just a playwright. Or a visual artist. He's a force of nature hellbent on saving the world by providing vehicles for artists and new voices he believes deserve to be heard.

Tom is the founder and executive director of the International Human Rights Art Festival. This is no ordinary event that transpires over a few days in a single location. Rather it is a year-round movement spanning multiple mediums: from stage to publishing to political actions around the world.

"I was a painter, a visual artist, for 25 years and a lot of my work was activist. I did a project called the Human Rights Painting Project in conjunction with Amnesty International. We would have politicians speak at our shows. I did paintings of human rights defenders, and we'd show in nontraditional spaces to engage a much wider audience."

This led to a manifesto which Tom titled "Prophetic Activist Art." He said the International Human Rights Art Festival (IHRAF) is an implementation of that model.

"We use creative activism to open a space to talk about the most important social issues challenging people in the United States and around the world. And then we use this work based on a very strict set of values—of beauty, sincerity, vulnerability, celebrating diversity, engagement—to open doorways to decision makers. So, we connect change makers to decision makers, and we work with politicians, government agencies, government leaders, non-art activists, other non-art organizations. We really want to open pathways of conversation instead of just talking about these issues to the usual suspects."

Tom has been running IHRAF for six years, but his passion and zest for the work is clearly evident when discussing the organization's ambitious programming.

"We are expanding. I have an editorial team which takes care of all the literary work. We have our magazine which we publish every six days. And then we have rapid response book publishing which we try to publish books during a geopolitical event: not historical, but in the middle of it."

"We're nimble like that. So, we published in the middle of the EndSARS protest against police brutality

in Nigeria. We published a book on Ukrainians speaking about the war last April, and we're about to publish "Iranian Women Speak" as they express their hopes and concerns within the context of ongoing issues right now."

One of the most visible IHRAF projects is a week-long performance festival in New York City every year around International Human Rights Day that highlights artists from around the world who live in New York.

The first Festival held at Dixon Place in 2017 hosted more than 150 artists producing 50 human rights-oriented events over the weekend.

Tom proudly boasts that the Festival was once "banned by the Catholic Church" when a performance at a church-owned venue was cancelled by the priest for content. But the Festival got the last laugh.

"The padre said 'If it's not too gay that might work, but the trans stuff? This is the Catholic church!' Three days before we were supposed to go up, we're scrambling for a venue. But because we had LGBTQIA and Trans content, we were in *The New York Times*. It was everywhere. It was great!"

The next festival will be December 4-10, 2023, at The Tank NYC, a 98-seat off-off-Broadway venue in the heart of midtown. The Festival team curates a diverse line-up of theatre, dance and music with a focus on pressing issues like climate change, Black Lives Matter, women's issues, LGBTQIA themes, human rights and social justice around

the world.

"We will have fourteen plays out of 40 performance blocks. We don't present full length plays, and we don't produce them. But we offer theatre artists a unique space where they're not going to be censored. They're going to be with like-minded artists and often connections are made between artists, and they go on to collaborate. We open up new audiences, because we pull from a lot of different pots with our audience. It's not just theatre goers. It's people who are interested in the issues being addressed."

According to its website (ihraf.org), "the International Human Rights Art Festival was founded on the belief that art can open hearts and minds and heal the wounds that are evident in our society."

"Through beauty, sincerity, and passion, we dissolve the boundaries between us. As artists, we engage in open-hearted creativity and discourse with politicians, social leaders, and others."

Tom encourages theatremakers (including self-producing playwrights) to get involved. "We provide a unique way for theatremakers to really express their most passionate ideas without worry of someone saying, 'I don't know if our audience is going to like this' or 'You don't want to piss people off.' Theatremakers in New York thank us for offering them a unique platform."

For more information, visit www.ihraf.org.