

For the arts, tidings of great joy

By **Colin Dabkowski** NEWS ARTS EDITOR Updated: December 25, 2011, 6:31 AM

Christmas arrived early this year for Western New York's theaters, galleries and cultural groups.

The first present arrived back on Election Day, with the surprise victory of Erie County Comptroller Mark Poloncarz over anti-arts incumbent Chris Collins in the county executive race.

Then, on Dec. 7, after two years of manufactured tumult on Buffalo's thriving arts scene, the Erie County Legislature voted to restore funding to 37 arts and cultural groups.

And finally, in what approaches a holiday miracle in itself, Erie County's lame duck culture warrior decided to lay down his arms and let the measure through unopposed. "Hallelujah" would not be too strong a word to describe the cultural community's reaction.

Today, as that community pauses to reflect on a harrowing year and looks ahead to better times, these investments seem to bear tidings of great joy:

Young Audiences of Western New York will receive \$7,016 in the 2012 budget, which the organization will use to add 10 hours per week to its fundraising and marketing position. That, according to executive director Cynn timer Gaasch, will help bring in an estimated \$35,000 more from outside sources—the equivalent of a full year of after-school programming with artists or long-term arts residencies at every grade level in one elementary school. "Which," Gaasch added, "is truly awesome."

Also awesome? The fact that Shakespeare in Delaware Park, which made significant cutbacks to its production values in its most recent season due to an \$85,710 cut, will be able to make its summer payroll and finance new costume and scene designs for its productions of "Richard III" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

"Most importantly, it puts everybody back on the payroll, and there is a direct correlation in that to the quality of our work," said company founder Saul Elkin.

Just Buffalo Literary Center, which sponsors the excellent and increasingly popular Babel reading series and runs literary and educational programs that reach 150,000 Western New Yorkers annually, will be able to use its county allocation of \$51,426 to hold onto about \$200,000 of matching funds from other sources that was likely to decrease without a county commitment.

Ujima Theatre, which cut its innovative Dunbar training program for young actors because of county funding cuts, will relaunch that project next year thanks to \$30,000 of county funding. With that same money, it will also hire an administrative assistant to help put the organization back on the path to excellence.

MusicalFare Theatre, which will receive \$33,332 in the new budget, plans to use the money to help launch a major theater event in downtown Buffalo this summer (the details of which are being kept under wraps), move along plans to expand its theater in Amherst and boost its electronic advertising efforts.

The Buffalo Arts Studio will use its \$30,000 investment to stabilize its exhibition program, prevent expected staff cuts and supplement printing, artist fees and rent.

Down at the Springville Center for the Arts, which depends on public funding for its educational programming, county money is used to leverage funding from the New York State Council on the Arts. "This translates into more programs for people who can't afford it, such as children and seniors, more programs in general and more revenue generated from better-marketed events," director Seth Wochensky wrote in an email. "If we get the county funding, our children's programs will double."

Repeat this story at dozens of arts groups across the county, each of which amplifies modest public dollars into big public service and economic return.

The take-away this Christmas Day? Smart and targeted public funding for the arts is the gift that keeps on giving.