

arts houston

Houston's monthly guide to the arts

March
Arts Calendar
enclosed!

Special Issue:

Dance in Houston

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Out of the Ordinary at the Menil
ArtistTalk: Choreographer Karen Stokes
ArtKids: FLYing High
Voices Breaking Boundaries
Perfectly Pesce

Volume 4, No. 3
March 2003
Retail price \$3.00

Raising Voices

Voices Breaking Boundaries: *International Women's Day Celebration*, March 13.

Diversity is a trendy word these days. We like to think – especially in Houston – that our society is more diverse than ever, and maybe that's true. But our cultural experience is often less so. Are the dancers all young? The actors all black? Is the audience mostly conservative? Is the conductor always a man?

There are many, many voices in this world, and many art forms in which to express them. Down at the grass roots level, below the radar of hip marketing and big-name events, is a Houston organization devoted to gathering these voices and amplifying them. Voices Breaking Boundaries (VBB), as the name implies, transcends barriers of age, race, gender, art form and experience to create, in just two years, a season of monthly events that are truly diverse. This year's shows have included Cuban poetry and art, poetry spoken by four generations, writing from Palestine, Paskistan, the Philippines and the Carribean (among others), two film events and the astonishing Words for Peace which brought together writers such as Arundhati Roy, Naomi Shihbah Nye and Ahmed Rashid via telephone conversations.

Sehba Sarwar is VBB's founder and artistic director. A novelist and poet, she teaches for Writers in the Schools and curates the PhoneWorks poetry line at DiverseWorks. Originally from Karachi, Pakistan, Sarwar constantly breaks her own boundaries, and is passionate about the need for art to do the same. Over coffee, she explained why.

What inspired you to create Voices Breaking Boundaries?

I began from a place of anger. Anger that while in Pakistan I had everything and everyone knew my work, in Houston I was nothing. I didn't want to have to choose between them – I wanted to have it all, to live in both places and write in both places. So I formed VBB as a way to start that.

In two years, VBB has grown amazingly, from readings at Borders to multi-media, globally

linked events at DiverseWorks.

When I look back at how we started, I just laugh. There was almost no preparation – I would just show up at Borders half an hour beforehand with no materials... Now it takes hours to set up!

I'm not surprised! From simple poetry readings you now have theater, dance, music, long-distance readings...

It's the theater space at DiverseWorks that's made that possible. They have the capacity, the lighting and sound. And our events bring people to DiverseWorks. There is a real synergy – we have goals in common, but our events don't overlap in content. It's mutually beneficial.

VBB is still very grass-roots, though.

Yes, we want to keep it that way. Anyone can curate an event: we don't ask to see references or experience. If someone has an idea, we say, go for it. We get an enormous variety and creativity from that. We want to hear all voices. *You've set up collaborations with other groups, also, like Nuestra Palabra, Arte Publico Press and Inprint.*

Relationships like these are exciting. This month's event, *La Voz Femenina*, presents award-winning author Graciela Limón, courtesy of curators Marina Tristán of Arte Público Press and poet and activist Carolina Monsivais from Houston Area Women's Center, along with an open mike, music, dance, dialogue and a presentation on domestic violence.

The last few years have seen a huge proliferation of events which break poetry out of the book and onto the stage: readings, poetry slams, multimedia performances. But is literature still a closed circle, despite the Internet and performance poetry?

Very much so. If you haven't published, you're no-one. Which is not the way it should be – I shouldn't need a publisher's stamp of approval to be known as a writer.

Has performance art changed literature?
I don't know the answer to that. I think it has



Anjali Dance director Rahnna Kumar: VBB's voices transcend boundaries of age, race, gender and art form.

changed people's expectations, and crossed boundaries. Interestingly, poetry as performance has a very strong tradition in many societies – South Asian, Asian, Latin American, African – an oral tradition, which is slowly breaking into the Anglo-American consciousness.

Has it changed your writing, personally?

I think so. Before I started this, I thought of myself as a novelist. Now, I write poetry, shorter pieces, and feel confident about presenting these.

Where does VBB go from here?

I'm not sure. I want us to keep growing. One thing I definitely want to create is an extension of VBB on the Internet, a community of voices with links between real communities in Houston, Karachi, Argentina... with live Webcasts at events, and exchanged writing. That is my dream! Who knows?

– Rosemary Ponnekanti

Voices Breaking Boundaries presents *La Voz Femenina*, the Annual International Women's Day Celebration on March 13, 6-8pm, at Blaffer Gallery, 1117 E. Fwy. For information on later events, call 713.228.2052, or visit www.voicesbreakingboundaries.org.