US PLEDGES TO MAKE ARTIST VISAS EASIER TO GET

Thursday, August 5, 2010

US Pledges to Make Artist Visas Easier to Get

▶ Share | Print | Download

Backstage: Getting visas for visiting artists to get easier

The Washington Post
By Jane Horwitz
Wednesday, August 4, 2010

It's never simple -- or inexpensive -- when small, nonprofit theater companies decide to bring in artists from abroad. The visa process has for years been notoriously slow and unpredictable, sometimes causing theaters to cancel shows almost at the last minute.

That situation is changing. The Performing Arts Alliance, which represents such organizations as the Theatre Communications Group, the League of American Orchestras, Dance/USA and OPERA America, has notified its members that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS) will reduce to two weeks the processing of petitions for those coming in under visas specific to artists and athletes.

In the past, theater companies had to pay a $1,000 fee to get a visa request expedited, and many small companies couldn't afford to do so. And cost wasn't the only hindrance. Artists invited to perform in the United States often encountered delays in their countries when they presented themselves at U.S. embassies or consulates to be interviewed for visas. One Washington area theater tells of young actors required to do a scene from a play in the lobby of a U.S. consulate to prove their skills.

"We had heard for a while, from the entertainment community, that the process was somewhat inconsistent and that there was a need for more predictability, if you will, in the results," says Chris Bentley, press secretary for CIS. The subject was discussed at a July 20 "listening session" in Washington with "stakeholders," including nonprofit arts organizations. The CIS officials listened to the concerns, Bentley says, and decided to "go back and see what . . . we can do to make the process any more predictable."

Now, he says, "we're moving the process along a lot faster than it had been moving in the past. . . . We're deciding these cases within 14 days."

Prospective visiting artists may, however, still face delays at embassies and consulates in their home countries. "The State Department has the responsibility for ensuring that the person who receives the visa is . . . coming here for the sole purpose of doing what the visa allows them to do," Bentley says.

Immigration lawyer Jonathan Ginsburg of Fettmann, Tolchin & Majors in Fairfax, worked with Congress in 1990 to amend the visiting-artists visa regulations into their current form. "Immigration has gotten to the point that it is every bit as complicated as the tax law," Ginsburg says.

"You have to find somebody willing to file the petition . . . get the information that's going to support whichever visa classification you selected . . . send it to the right place, with the right fee, with the right number of copies. And then, if you've done all that, you're only halfway through the process, because each person for whom you've petitioned becomes an individual visa applicant at some foreign post."

If there's any doubt about an artist's bona fides, Ginsburg says, CIS has assumed they are "intending immigrants" who just want a way into the country. While Ginsburg agrees that there have been unfair denials of visas in recent years, he is also quick to note that arts organizations, especially small ones, sometimes mess up their applications or wait too long to file them.

GALA Hispanic Theatre often brings in artists from Latin America or Spain, and has occasionally brought in Cuban artists. "We try to be Latino-authentic," says GALA Executive Director Rebecca Medrano. "Latino is not just one thing. If you have a play that's culturally specific, the best thing to do is to get the best artist who knows that style or that genre."

But it hasn't always worked out. "All of this takes just a huge amount of time for a staff person. I felt like I was working for Immigration," Medrano says, "by the time I wrote it all up and took it to the lawyer." In 2002, GALA did "El Lugar Ideal" by Cuban playwright Hector Quintero, and applied 14 months ahead of time to bring him in to direct. CIS, Medrano says, "asked for more stuff and more stuff . . . they finally never gave [the visa] to him." Artistic Director Hugo Medrano ended up having to direct the play. Quintero got here in time to see the play at the end of the run, she says.

Solas Nua, which performs contemporary Irish works, had to cancel a show last season, "Danny and Chantelle (Still Here)," because, as Artistic Director Linda Murray explained via e-mail while visiting Dublin, "our director's visa wasn't processed in time. After a 45-day wait, we expedited the visa at considerable cost, but still weren't able to get him in on time." Murray wrote that they've learned at Solas Nua "to count back six months from the date we want an artist to visit."

Theater J is bringing in the Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv to perform "Return to Haifa" in January. The cast includes at least one Arab actor. "These onerous visa regulations and the crapshoot that is involved with bringing an Arab actor onto these shores made us all very nervous," says Artistic Director Ari Roth.

Even once the visa process is streamlined, Roth wonders: "Will it be easier for some international artists than others, depending on their names, on where they come from? Hopefully, the streamlining will mean it's a lot less of a dramatically fraught process."

It's not uncommon for small arts organizations to avoid the visa process altogether. "Let's just assume that there are plenty of artists who work in the United States who come in and come out on tourist visas," notes Roth.

Nucky Walder of Teatro de la Luna, another longtime Spanish-language theater company here, says bringing in artists and whole troupes from abroad, as Luna does for its annual International Festival of Hispanic Theater, is "the most difficult part of our life. . . . It's unbelievable that sharing arts and culture could be that difficult. We are not doing business-business, but just sharing our culture, but it's something difficult anyway."

Follow spots

-- Studio Theatre will hold its annual garage sale Saturday from 10 to 5 at its location at 14th and P streets NW. There will be items from sets, costumes of this past season and more. E-mail studio@studiotheatre.org or call 202-232-7267 begin_of_the_skype_highlighting 202-232-7267 end_of_the_skype_highlighting.

-- Longacre Lea, the company of intrepid area performers who do intellectually twisty shows each August, will offer a world-premiere adaptation by Artistic Director Kathleen Akerley of Kurt Vonnegut's novel "Cat's Cradle." It will run Aug. 11-Sept. 5 in the small Callan Theatre in Catholic University's Hartke Theatre complex, 3801 Harewood Rd. NE. Visit http://www.longacrelea.org or call 202-460-2188 begin_of_the_skype_highlighting 202-460-2188 end_of_the_skype_highlighting.

-- Studio 2ndStage, which has extended the musical "Passing Strange" through Aug. 22, is scheduled to play host at Saturday's evening performance to the show's creators -- Stew, who penned the book and lyrics and starred in the autobiographical show on Broadway and in Spike Lee's film of it; Heidi Rodewald, who wrote the music with Stew and was part of the band on Broadway and in the film; and Steve Klein, co-producer of the stage show and the film.

Horwitz is a freelance writer.

< back

previous listing • next listing