

THIS CAMPAIGN IS STATE OF THE NEW YORK ARTS

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By STUART ELLIOTT

No wonder the price of gold keeps going up, with all the golden anniversaries being commemorated this year.

Among the events being observed that happened 50 years ago, in 1961, are the inauguration of John F. Kennedy as president, the flight that made Alan Shepard the first American in space and the efforts by Freedom Riders to desegregate the South.

Still to come are the 50th anniversaries of the building of the Berlin Wall, Roger Maris's hitting 61 home runs and the publication of "Catch-22."

A 50th anniversary that is to be honored with a campaign that starts this week is for the New York State Council on the Arts. The council was established in 1960 with the backing of Nelson A. Rockefeller, then the governor of New York, and began operations the following year.

The council is known by the shorthand initials Nysca, pronounced "NISS-ka." The word is heard frequently in a series of video clips celebrating the golden anniversary that will be uploaded to YouTube beginning on Monday.

Initially, there will be about a dozen videos. The intent is to eventually produce, yes, 50, one for each year the council has been active.

Each video features an artist or the leader of an arts group who has benefited from the grants bestowed by the council in the last five decades.

The names involved range from the familiar like the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and American Ballet Theater to the lesser known, like the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance and Flamenco Vivo.

The campaign, which carries the theme "Fifty Years, Fifty Stories," is the brainchild of the New York City Arts Coalition, which no one seems to call Nycac — perhaps because "NIGH-kack" is so much less euphonious than "NISS-ka."

The coalition is an advocacy organization that seeks to promote a broader awareness of the role that arts play in the life of the city. The coalition encourages elected and appointed officials to support the right of artists to creative expression as well as to provide "adequate appropriations" for the arts in city, state and federal budgets.

For a campaign with a golden motif, the budget is surprisingly thrifty: about \$30 for each video clip, or around \$1,500.

The coalition is working on the campaign directly, without involving agencies. The organizations and artists appearing in the videos are being asked to create the clips themselves; some are even being produced with Flip video camcorders.

The campaign is another reminder of how the new media are significantly remaking the way campaigns come to market.

One of the principal goals of the coalition was to "find a way to make use of new technologies and social media" to "show the impact of Nysca on the artists and the communities they serve," said Lane Harwell, director of Dance/NYC and a member of the steering committee of the coalition.

So to promote the videos as they arrive on youtube.com, he added, the coalition will use its Web site, nycartscoalition.org, as well as its Facebook page, and its Twitter feed, at twitter.com/AdvocateNYCArts.

The organizations that belong to the steering committee are also being asked to upload the videos to their Web sites, Mr. Harwell said, and distribute them through e-mails and social media.

The genesis of the campaign dates to a meeting at the end of last year, Mr. Harwell recalled, at which "we were talking about our advocacy strategy for 2011."

"We were looking at this year as the 50th anniversary of Nysca," he added, and an idea was proposed by another member of the steering committee, Ted Berger, the executive director of an organization named New York Creates, and a consultant, Anne Dennin.

The suggestion was to present the anniversary as "an opportunity for a celebration," Mr. Harwell said, rather than another effort at "traditional advocacy" like urging officials not to cut budgets for the arts.

The strategy is to "find a way to change the conversation," he added, and "inspire policy makers." Another purpose of the campaign is to "express enthusiasm for the funding model" that Nysca uses to support artists across the state, Mr. Harwell said.

The model is "discipline-specific," he explained, in that the council earmarks grants for dance, music and theater; the disciplines do not compete against each other for money.

"As state councils go, Nysca has been the leader," Mr. Harwell said, "and set a precedent for the National Endowment for the Arts."

The coalition is delighted with the response from the artists and arts groups asked to participate in the campaign, he added.

The first videos are all on the short-and-sweet side, ranging in length from less than a minute to less than two and a half minutes.

Those who appear in the clips refer to the anniversary as a 50th birthday, and some even wish the council a "happy birthday."

Some clips are minimalist, featuring one person speaking to the camera. Others are a bit more elaborate, with multiple speakers and scenes of artists performing or at rehearsals.

For instance, Joel Harrison, a guitarist and composer, wishes Nysca "a happy 50th birthday" as "The Wheel," the work he wrote with the support of the council, plays in the background and at the end of the video.

"I feel that it all started with that first opportunity that Nysca gave me," Mr. Harrison said, and it was multiplied in the form of other fellowships and commissions.

A video that features Patricia Cruz, executive director of Harlem Stage, also includes Willerm Delistfort, a jazz pianist, who says "a big thank you" to the council because without it "there wouldn't be me"; members of the Impact Repertory Theater; and Marcus Strickland of the Marcus Strickland Quartet.

The Cruz video ends with eight people in unison wishing the council well.

Robert Battle, artistic director-designate of the Ailey company, praised Nysca for more than two decades of grants that made possible "subsidized rehearsal space for more than 50 companies and 500 artists."

"This is crucial and critical," Mr. Battle said.

The Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, located in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx, is represented by its founders, Arthur Aviles, artistic director, and Charles Rice-Gonzalez, executive director, who wear T-shirts bearing the group's acronym, Baad.

As Mr. Rice-Gonzalez talks to the camera, Mr. Aviles dances behind him. When Mr. Rice-Gonzalez completes his short remarks, Mr. Aviles speaks, a bit breathlessly, about how Nysca enables him to dance "and keep dance strong" in the Bronx.

He and Mr. Rice-Gonzalez conclude, in unison, "Happy 50th birthday, Nysca."

Ping Chong, artistic director of the theater company Ping Chong & Company, declares that it is "because of Nysca, Nysca's support, that we are able to grow."

"Happy 50th birthday, Nysca," he concludes, "and many, many more to come."

David Parsons, artistic director of Parsons Dance, discusses how when his dancers travel overseas "people understand New York State is a funder of our company" and how "we are very proud of that."

Another positive, Mr. Parsons says, is that "when you are vetted out by the New York State Council of the Arts, that's a Good Housekeeping seal of approval, and it helps our company obtain money from other sources."

In a phone interview, Mr. Parsons elaborated on that point.

"It gives you that cachet," he said, which is important because the objective is to "spread out" financing and obtain money from as many sources as possible.

Mr. Parsons said he gladly agreed to make the video because "as artists, we appreciate the taxpayers' dollars" and "the arts are very important to the economy."

It is the first time he has taken part in a campaign of this kind, he added.

Mr. Harrison, the guitarist, echoed that, saying this was also a first for him.

"I've had a lot of help from Nysca," he said in a phone interview, so he was pleased to "vigorously state my belief" in its work.

"I got my first grant from them," he added, "and it paid off like 10 times."

Ms. Cruz, of Harlem Stage, said that she, too, had not been in a campaign like this previously.

"It's very exciting we can do it," she said in a phone interview, because "I don't know how we think we can sustain a society" that does not support the arts.

"Whenever we can step up to insist this is what we need, we should do it," she added.

The reason her video, at least initially, has the most people appearing on camera, Ms. Cruz said, was that "every time a group of artists came in" as the clip was being made, "we said, 'You need to get in on this.' "

"They understood the importance of it," she added.

Mr. Battle of Alvin Ailey, in another phone interview, made a point similar to Ms. Cruz's in discussing how "the arts are not supported the way we'd like them to be."

The assistance that Nysca provides for dance companies ought to be acknowledged, he added, because "dance is usually the one that's last on the list" when grants are distributed.

"I'm happy to stand on the front lines" and produce a video, Mr. Battle said. "Things are easy to do when there's a personal stake and you believe in the cause."

[Click to view statements from dance artists.](#)

