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Spreading culture in Jamaica

Free dance shows at JPAC highlight community's artistic side



Members of Duhon Dance perform a number in front of the Jamaica Performing Arts Center's new space. Photo provided by GJDC

The Jamaica Performing Arts Center has been putting on dazzling dance shows in front of its nearly completed new headquarters on Jamaica Avenue and 153rd Street.

As the series heads into its final performance Saturday, administrators at the Greater Jamaica Development Corp., which helped coordinate the three-week show, say it was not only a way for dance groups to showcase their talent but also promote the neighborhood's culture.

Max Musicant, a project manager at GJDC, said the free shows gave downtown area visitors something new as the days got shorter.

"We had a good turnout. We had our own little traffic jam," he said. "It brings smiles to people's faces as they walk on a cold day."

The groups that perform in front of JPAC's new performing arts center, in the final stages of a multimillion-dollar renovation, use modern

dance styles in their numbers, but their shows are reflective of the borough's past, according to Musicant.

The Astoria-based Duhon Dance group, that headlined the Saturday show, had a performance that was dedicated to Rufus King, an 18th-century diplomat and signer of the Constitution who lived in Jamaica. Southeast Queens group Ballet International Africans is scheduled to perform this Saturday.

"They kind of blend the African style of dance with Western ballet. This is a piece that they've done before about the diaspora," Musicant said.

In addition to spreading art to the masses, the series was also made to complement Jamaica's growth as a commercial hot spot. With businesses aiming to take advantage of the new zoning and the AirTrain terminal, Musicant said the artistic scene would enhance the neighborhood's progress.

"We feel as Jamaica develops economically, its art side should benefit as well," he said.

The series' success may pave the way for more outdoor shows, even after the performing arts center officially opens its doors, according to Greater Jamaica. Musicant said he would like to have other concerts and performances in the spring and summer.

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