

Portland's Creative Laureate promotes multicultural, multidisciplinary collaborations

By Maileen Hamto
The Asian Reporter

Asian Heritage Month is a time of remembering, learning, and growing. As we celebrate the month and reflect on the influence of Asian Pacific Americans (APAs), we take a look locally at an example of commitment, inspiration, and pride.

For Singapore-born Subashini Ganesan, Portland's new Creative Laureate, creating and cultivating opportunities and relationships across the city is one of her key priorities for advancing multicultural and multidisciplinary spaces that generate innovative works.

Being the first woman of color named to represent Portland's creative community is testament to Portland's commitment to nurturing and promoting artists, creatives, and makers in all disciplines and media. Ganesan was nominated to the coveted role by commissioner Nick Fish, who serves as the Portland City Council's liaison to the Regional Arts & Culture Council. Ganesan was installed as the city's second Creative Laureate in January 2018.

Serving a two-year term, Ganesan is the official ambassador for the broader creative community in Portland. She participates in community education, advocacy, and public events, including speaking engagements, workshops, and ceremonial functions.

As a dancer and choreographer of *Bharathanatyam* — an ancient dance form of South India — Ganesan brings a wealth of experience and passion to the work. She was part of the stakeholder group that shepherded the development of the city's arts affordability plan, which focused on protecting and expanding affordable arts spaces in Portland, because venues for performances and rehearsals are increasingly limited due to higher real estate costs in the city.

She credits the office of commissioner Fish in leading the development of best



practices that the city can adopt to bring affordability to artists and artist spaces across the city.

"As Creative Laureate, I'm connecting with other stakeholders so we can bring more visibility to what affordability really means for diverse artists in Portland," Ganesan said. "The best thing is having this huge opportunity to connect, collaborate, and create friendships with such a vast and diverse community of people who are involved in the arts and creative work in Portland."

Ganesan's leadership in the regional arts community as an educator, a performer, and a nonprofit founder is well known. She is a professional artist who teaches with The Right Brain Initiative and Young Audiences of Oregon & SW Washington and also has performed at numerous Portland-area and regional festivals.

"Suba has a unique ability to inspire audiences, educate youth, and bring communities together," said Jeff Hawthorne, interim executive director of the Regional Arts & Culture Council. "Her vision, leadership, and passion for equity will enhance Portland's reputation as a global center of creativity. We look forward to collaborating with her."

Her journey toward creating and sustaining New Expressive Works (NEW) was anchored by her commitment to providing performance artists an affordable and accessible space to develop and show new works. Since 2012, she has made available NEW's thriving studio on S.E. Belmont Street to host a residency program for choreographers.

"My formula was super simple: Apply for residency and receive six months of rehearsal space for free, which amounts to about 150 hours of access to the space," Ganesan explained. "I work hard to keep NEW going, because there are few venues left that are affordable, intimate, and closed in."

Four choreographers make up a cohort. Independent performing artists work across cultures and across disciplines. At the end of the residency, NEW coordinates a weekend performance where artists present their new works.

Over the course of 10 residency cycles, NEW has hosted 40 choreographers, and more than 120 collaborators have benefitted from the program.

"There's a certain magic that is created when we can foster a multicultural, multidisciplinary professional space. My passion has always been around finding ways for communities to connect through the arts — across cultures, generations, and professional levels," says Ganesan.

"That's why I'm eager to connect with larger, diverse, and intersectional populations to come up with long-term advocacy and solutions, so we can keep growing as a creative and artistic community for years to come."

Ganesan's collaborative approach to

CULTIVATING COLLABORATION. For Singapore-born Subashini Ganesan (pictured), Portland's new Creative Laureate, creating and cultivating opportunities and relationships across the city is one of her key priorities for advancing multicultural and multidisciplinary spaces that generate innovative works. (Photo/Manilo Castillo)

engaging the creative community is influenced by her early years in cosmopolitan Singapore, where "a lot of cultures commingle because of necessity." Her experiences as a choreographer in Portland inspired her to strengthen her advocacy efforts for diverse artists and performers who are bringing vibrant and professional artistry to Portland audiences.

"I want to make sure people see that there is a success story, and that the success story is an artist of color, whose foundation is in a classical South Indian dance form, not necessarily a western art form," she said.

"It's significant to me that I'm able to show visibility to what professionalism means to an artist of color who connects the traditional and contemporary worlds."

In addition to her passion for preserving affordable venues for artists to continue to thrive in fast-changing Portland, Ganesan is also dedicating her time as Creative Laureate toward dismantling barriers of entry among artists who specialize in cultural artistic traditions.

"For artists of color whose foundation is in non-western traditions, we tend to get boxed into certain categories like culturally specific art. Often, we're not presented in more general arenas," she said.

"That's something I keep advocating for: to make sure we are fostering the visibility of diverse professional artists who have a foundation in non-western art forms."

Beyond her advocacy work as Portland's Creative Laureate, Ganesan remains dedicated to her art form. She continues to teach dance and choreograph new works, devoting many hours to orienting young dancers to the beauty of Bharathanatyam, the 2,000-year-old dance form from South India.

"I bring the traditional part of my culture with as much authenticity and clarity of context because I want people to experience a different viewpoint. There are universal emotions and experiences that are present in the culture, and it's a way to connect and bridge relationships through the art form."

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