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Making Tickets Accessible to All Is a Goal for Arts Organizations

By Anne Levin

With inflation on the rise, tickets to performing arts events can be steep. It can cost hundreds of dollars for a ticket to a Broadway show. Getting into a performance of New York City Ballet's *The Nutcracker* can go as high as \$305 for prime seats.

While prices don't reach those levels for locally-based professional theater, music, and dance events, arts administrators are aware that tickets are out of reach for a sector of the population. Several organizations including McCarter Theatre, American Repertory Ballet (ARB), Princeton Symphony Orchestra (PSO), and State Theatre New Jersey (STNJ) are addressing the situation with special discounts, programs, and initiatives designed to make their offerings accessible to a wider audience.

"All arts organizations are currently faced with re-examining and re-imagining the approach to not just welcoming guests, but also maintaining a meaningful relationship," said Debbie Bisno, director of university and artistic partnerships at McCarter Theatre. "Among our efforts to remove as many barriers as possible and to ensure McCarter is accessible to those who might otherwise not be able or choose to attend, we launched two new Partner pilots."

The theater's 22/23 Partner Pass gives first-time subscribers three shows, with two tickets each, for \$48. This offer was started last month and closes this Saturday, October 8. McCarter's Tuesday Meet Ups allow those who work or volunteer at nonprofits free admission to main stage shows on Tuesday nights. This includes the current *The Wolves*, and upcoming *Between Two Knees*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. (*A Christmas Carol* is not included in the offer).

In 2019, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and the New Jersey Historical Commission partnered with the New Jersey Department of Human Services and New Jersey Department of

Health to launch New Jersey's Families First Discovery Pass program. Free to Families First cardholders and WIC (supplemental nutrition program) recipients, it provides free or highly discounted admissions to arts and history organizations, venues, and programs.

American Repertory Ballet, which is based in Princeton and New Brunswick, participates in Families First programs, one of which is ACCESS: Ballet, described as "a community initiative that provides opportunities to experience live performing arts for those who would normally not have the ability to do so, due to financial and/or other barriers," said company spokesman Dan Bauer in an email. "The average cost of a ticket to see a ballet performed by American Repertory Ballet is \$40. While this cost is comparably inexpensive when looking at the cost of attending a performance in New York City or Philadelphia, it is still an unimaginable expense for many. In an effort to support ARB's mission to bring the joy, beauty, artistry, and discipline of classical and contemporary dance to New Jersey and beyond, ARB is pleased to offer ACCESS: Ballet."

The company also sponsors in-school residencies, student matinees, and the DANCE POWER program that has served more than 50,000 third grade students in the New Brunswick public school system since 1986.

Also in New Brunswick, State Theatre New Jersey recently launched the DiscoveryTix Program with the support of Bank of America for the 2022-2023 season. Since becoming a nonprofit in 1988, STNJ has provided millions of dollars in free and subsidized programs, according to a recent press release. "In continued support of this commitment and to help remove economic barriers that prevent access to the performing arts, STNJ will allocate a set amount of \$10 tickets to every State Theatre presented performance for families and individuals enrolled in New Jersey's Families First Discovery Program," it reads.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra, which offers multiple ways to make concerts more accessible, also participates in the Families First program. In addition, there are discount ticket programs available for residents of adult communities, military families, university students, and children ages 5-17, who receive tickets that are half the cost of an adult ticket. University students can receive \$15 tickets to any performance presented solely by the PSO. The orchestra also participates in Art-Reach ACCESS, a Philadelphia-based program that gives cardholders \$2 tickets to any of these performances.

As the pandemic eases and audiences rebuild, arts organizations are especially focused on making their offerings inclusive to all. "McCarter is dedicated to welcoming patrons back to the performing arts," said Bisno. "We believe the arts are a vital part of our community, and that the diverse range of work on our stages

and in our classrooms creates space for discovery, growth, and dialogue.”

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