

# ARTS & CULTURE



Photo by Eric Santwire

Stacy Hundin performs in the “Halloween Catwalk Party” at the Steel Wheels diner/pub in Fergus Falls Oct. 30, 2021. The show has become a staple of the Fergus Falls area, and one which organizer Dominic Facio plans to expand into New London’s Little Theatre this fall as part of his 2022 Small Stages Artist Residency.

## New London artist residency brings ‘runway’ to rural Midwest

By Brett Blocker  
Editor

From Ancient Greece and Elizabethan England up to the recent rise of RuPaul, for as long as there’s been theatre, there’s been drag.

While initially used as a way to exclude women from the performing arts by casting men in female roles, drag has since evolved into its own artistic medium – a form of self-expression challenging traditional gender roles through exaggerated masculine and feminine personas and elaborate outfits, often exhibited on stage with live music and lip-syncing performances.

It’s also the basis of an upcoming production at Little Theatre Auditorium.

Following the success of its inaugural 2021 Small Stages Artist Residency, in which metro area puppet artist Steve Ackerman was selected to create an original set and script based on the town and its residents, the 2022 residency is set to feature the work of Fergus Falls artist Dominic Facio.

Facio was selected as this year’s resident artist in late May, as determined by a group of New London artists and arts advocates. The residency application called on practicing artists to develop an original work – using Little Theatre Auditorium as a venue – over the course of four-to-six weeks. Selection criteria includes that the artist focuses on community engagement, with the goal of “creating new approaches for how our citizens engage with each other and with shared spaces, especially in this time of isolation, divisiveness and uncertainty.”

The artist receives a stipend and budget for materials with funds from the Southwest Minnesota Arts Council. Ahead of the production itself, the artist will engage with the community through open studio sessions or workshops, and has the option of living in a nearby rental home during this time.

By day, Facio is the Rural Program Coordinator for Springboard for the Arts – a non-profit organization with offices in

St. Paul and Fergus Falls, aimed at supporting community arts engagement. As his “side gig,” however, he has been organizing, since 2009, a series of public arts events throughout rural West Central Minnesota – with particular focus on costuming, music and make-up.

His resume includes organizing a “Zombie Crawl/Monster Mash”(2009-21), described as a free public event in which the Fergus Falls community donned its “most creative zombie costumes, walk and lurch up and down our Main Street together,” culminating at The Spot Panini and Wine, where attendees enjoyed live music, DJ sets and food and drink specials.

Similarly, his “Danse Macabre” event (2018-19), featured free, public monthly music performances exploring the post-punk/goth subculture – or in his words, “a reason for people to get dressed up, put on black lipstick, platform shoes and dance the night away in a room full of fog.”

His “Catwalk Party,” however, remains this mainstay – a recurring Fergus Falls event which he aims to bring to New London through this artist residency.

“Noticing the rural LGBTQ+ community



Photo by Jennifer Striffler

“Mrs. Moxie” lip-syncs beneath laser lights during a show at Battle Lake’s Stella’s Bistro & Wine in August of 2021.

did not have a platform to express themselves,” Facio began the “Catwalk” in June of 2018 – the first drag show in Fergus Falls, as part of Springboard for the Arts’ Year of Play initiative. Due to strong reception from the community, the show has become a staple in Fergus Falls, with six additional shows held throughout Fergus Falls, Elizabeth and Battle Lake up through 2021.

Of that first performance in 2018, held at The Spot Panini and Wine, Facio said, “I hired four local drag

performers and one drag performer from Minneapolis. The audience was spilling out of the backroom... with over 100 people in attendance. It was very well received, with one individual telling me, ‘I’ve lived in Fergus Falls for the past 20 years, and I’ve never had more fun than tonight!’”

So what exactly is “Catwalk?” “If I had to describe it in one word, I would say ‘energetic,’” Facio told the Review.

As the name suggests, past shows involved an 8-foot T-shaped catwalk, down which performers strutted their stuff, clad in colorful garb amid laser lights, fog, music (for lip-syncing) and a hosting emcee.

A “Catwalk Party” includes some adult humor, Facio said, “but it’s not crass – there’s no nudity or anything like that. Just heightened masculinity, heightened femininity and something in-between; kind of campy, and cathartic for perform-

ers.” The show is welcome to all, regardless of identity, background or orientation, but Facio recommends ages 16 and older. “If you let your [teenager] listen to a parental advisory CD, they’re probably fine at ‘Catwalk,’” he said.

Although performers have been a regular cast (dubbed “The Catwalk Crew”), Facio said he is open to the idea of local performers from the New London area partaking in the upcoming show, if there is enough interest.

While drag shows are common in metropolitan cities and on many university campuses, such shows are, for the most part, absent from rural communities. Facio aims to change that.

“The overarching goal is to show people what’s possible in a rural setting,” he said. “What I do here is already being done in metro areas, so the idea is to keep alternative arts happening in rural spaces.”

He also hopes these performances will help break down social barriers amid an increasingly polarized socio-political climate.

“At my productions, there is no ‘us versus them.’ There is only this experience that we are all a part of at that moment,” he said. “When the ‘Catwalk Party’ first happened (in Fergus Falls), it was during a really divisive time, but people from all sides came together, snapping their fingers, tipping performers, carrying on having a good time... The direct audience feedback is a reminder that we are all human and trying to navigate this thing called life.”

Providing a voice to the LGBTQ+ community has led to tangible change in Fergus Falls, he adds. Though not directly affiliated with “Catwalk,” just last year the city became host to the SAGA (Sexuality and Gender Alliance) Center. “They’re an LGBTQ+ youth group that have events, arts and crafts and a house where they host these events,” he said. “Just a welcoming space so kids don’t have to feel so alone or misunderstood.”

Facio himself said his art has been molded by his adolescent experiences.

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### “Landscapes”

Mixed media visual artist Jean Trumbo previewed her exhibition titled, “Landscapes” at her open house on Wednesday, June 15 in advance of this weekend’s Studio Hop showing. “It’s about my life journey. Landscapes have always been there for me,” she said. Trumbo’s work will be on display at Little Theatre Auditorium through July. Studio Hop takes place this weekend (June 17-18) with nine artists at five local studios. For more information, visit: [studiohop.org](http://studiohop.org).

Photo by Bethany Lacktorin