



## Embark Peekskill Celebrates the Arts

By Bruce Apar

**A** melting pot of artistic celebration, this multicultural alliance champions socially conscious self-expression. Founders Katie Schmidt Feder and Sol Miranda (who's in the cast of the Tina Fey Netflix series *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*) shepherd an ambitious array of workshops, professional performances, dance classes, ambient music ensembles, improv/open-mic/storytelling slams, and more.

That, in a nutshell, describes the unique cachet of Embark Peekskill, a six-year-old community arts organization that prides itself on being original, thought-provoking and entertaining, all at the same time. It's no easy feat, especially with the belt-tightening in the world of arts-funding.

Standing on the shoulders of its formidable founders, Embark Peekskill has far-reaching ambitions, but also has achieved enough to capture the attention of *Westchester Magazine*, which awarded it a coveted "Best of Westchester" honor in its July issue, dubbing it an "Avant-Garde Community Arts Organization."

Anchoring its big plans is creation of "a performing and literary arts center for Peekskill as a home and venue" for performances and workshops. It took a step closer to that goal when it had a ribbon-cutting this past May for its new home at The Flatz on Main Street. Embark occupies office space in the beautifully restored historic structure's third floor, where there also is a commodious studio for teaching and performance.



*The Fantasticks directed by Katie Schmidt, photo credit: James Brooks*

"We are grateful to [Flatz owners] Erik Contzius and Monica Flaherty for supporting the arts and artists," says Sol. "It's a beautiful building."

What separates Embark from other community-centric arts groups – whether in the Hudson Valley or anywhere else in the U.S. – is its far-reaching palette of presentations, some of which veer toward the experimental and edgy to explore new ideas, topics and impulses.

This year they have presented a piece called "Gun Country" – a collection of true stories about firearms -- and "Hormones, Health and Happiness" as part of its Women Celebrating Women series.

"We want to create an environment where it's welcoming and not elitist," says Ms. Feder. "When you get people together to work on a piece and attend it, a lot of walls come down. That's one of the powers of theater: To see that 'Others are talking about this thing I am afraid to admit.'"

An awareness of social justice is at the heart of those Embark productions. "We're creating community conversations," says Katie Feder.

On Wednesdays from 8 p.m.-9:30 p.m., there's an improvisation workshop in The Flatz ballroom. In accordance with Embark's mission to be fully inclusive, all comers are encouraged to jump in and participate. There is modest suggested donation, but no

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experience of any kind is required.

On some Saturdays, there is a Swing Dance that includes instruction, and a monthly Open Mic invites the public to take the stage to tell a story or play original music. Embark's Suite Music Series features artists in concert like Joe Adami, who sang his original tunes last month in the third floor performance space.

Co-founders Sol Miranda and Katie Schmidt Feder share extensive credentials in the performing arts as well as a passion to give others a platform to create and present to the public. They were honored by the City of Peekskill in 2015 with the Living Legacy Award for women of distinction.

Earlier this year, they produced *The Hispanick Zone*. It was brought to them by Luis Guzman, a hair salon proprietor who in the 1970s performed in Broadway productions. The Latino play was performed in English by 20 community members.

There also are regular classes for such interests as teen acting, Zumba, dance, writing, storytelling, songwriting and musical instruments.

The Embark impresarios always are seeking to collaborate with other artists. They are in talks with Suzi Tipa -- who appeared last fall in their fantastic staging at The Flatz of legendary musical "The Fantasticks" -- to help her revive a world dance theater company that has performed in Manhattan.

Funding always is a challenge for not-for-profit arts companies, as Katie Schmidt Feder explains. "To continue," she says, "we need a much larger donor base. Most non-profits make 75% of revenue from grants and individual donors. Very little comes from fundraising events." She adds they constantly are looking for ways "to get the community to value us because what we do is unique."

Sol and Katie are known around town as non-stop networkers who can connect artists and businesses or sponsors with each other. "Ask us for blues pianist or a jazz singer or just about any kind of performer," says Katie, "and Sol will have a name for you."

Although Embark does not operate as a professional theatre company, it is looking for "people to volunteer professional expertise" to join its board and help with fundraising and strategic planning. They point to 1) an expanded Board, 2) applying for Grants, 3) building a base of Sustaining Donors, and 4) recruiting Volunteers as the four cornerstones that they need to form a rock-solid foundation for the future, as they embark on the next phase of their journey toward The Big Vision.

As they say in the theater to wish good luck as performers are about to go on stage, "Break a leg!"

Embark Peekskill is headquartered at The Flatz, Suites 301-302, 1008 Main Street, Peekskill, N.Y. 10566; (914) 671-7772; EmbarkPeekskill.org.

Here are highlights of upcoming events by

## *Embark Peekskill:*

SEPT. 17

*Swing Dance with Jazz Trio Honey*  
7 pm class, 8-11 Dance

SEPT. 18

*Tribes Hill Presents Folk Music*  
4:30 pm

SEPT. 23

*Vent Nouveau Wind Ensemble (Tentative)*  
8 pm

SEPT. 25

*Concert to End Gun Violence (Tentative)*  
Time TBD

OCT. 8

*Mario Giacalone – Suite Music Series – Folk & Blues*  
8 pm

OCT. 16

*Tribes Hill Presents Folk Music*  
4:30 pm

OCT. 22-23

*Hispanic Month Theatrical Celebration*  
8 pm

*Creative Dance Class*

– photo credit Kevin Michael Winterfield

swing dance at EMBARK



*Midsummer Night's Firefly and Fairy Festival*  
(this was the 6th festival on 7/23 at Depew Park.)



*The EmBeciles Improv Troupe* – photo Katie Feder



*The Hispanick Zone* directed by Luis Alonso,  
photo credit: James Brooks