

New American Festival Shines Spotlight on Immigration Through Art



August 26, 2019 | [Britt Stigler](#)

POSTED IN [Music](#), [Visual](#), [Words](#)

For the past several months, Katherine Steinberg has been busy organizing a festival that she describes as a “true cornucopia of culture.” Titled the [New American Festival](#), the event was conceived as a way to celebrate immigrants’ contributions to art through a wide-ranging, multidisciplinary celebration. And despite its sprawling nature, the whole affair — to Steinberg’s surprise — came together quickly.

“As soon as I was like, ‘Listen, we’re gonna do this. We’re going to put it all together, and it’s gonna be a big undertaking, but it’s going to be a big, exciting, new project. Are you on board?’” said Steinberg, “everybody was like, ‘Yes. How can I help, and who else can I get to help?’ There was just so much enthusiasm and momentum behind it from everyone I spoke to.”

Steinberg is the director of content strategy at the bipartisan immigration group, New American Economy, which is the presenting force behind the endeavor. Billed as the “first-of-its-kind,” the festival kicks off Sept. 14 at New York City’s [NeueHouse](#) and is slated to make a national tour to cities across the United States afterward.

For the launch in New York, author Padma Lakshmi will give the keynote address, with sex therapist Dr. Ruth K. Westheimer and comedian Hasan Minhaj scheduled to speak as well. Musical acts, such as Japanese Breakfast, Ruth B. and Baby Yors, and performances from Ballet Hispánico and comedians Ronny Chieng, Aparna Nancherla, Aminatou Sow and others, round out the programming.

In each iteration, the festival will comprise dance, music, food, comedy, film and more to reflect, according to Steinberg, “all the ways that immigrants make a huge impact on American culture and are a huge part of the fabric of American society.”

The festival aims to frame conversations around immigration in a positive manner, highlighting the achievements and contributions of immigrant artists as opposed to participating in contentious political discourse.

“It’s sometimes difficult for people to talk politics and wrap their heads around what’s going on,” Steinberg said. “But I think everybody wants to look at all of the positive ways that people contribute, and this is a really lovely way without being super political for people to celebrate.”

Eduardo Vilaro, the artistic director and CEO of [Ballet Hispánico](#), stressed that art offers an alternative language to speak about immigration.

“We need another language because the language we’re using is not working. We are screaming at each other. We are divided because our language doesn’t have the tools,” said Vilaro, adding, “and I think art does have the tools.”

Using art as the conduit for these discussions allows, Steinberg said, for personal connections to be made regardless of background.

“When you’re creating something, it’s incredibly personal... But what makes it transcend is that it’s relatable,” Steinberg said. “I think art is in the unique position [to make] the personal relatable and [to speak] across demographics.”

And while the festival does not have an expressed political agenda, Steinberg said that she hopes that it will inspire engagement around immigration.

“It would be really wonderful for everybody to really internalize how important immigrants and immigration are to American culture writ large and speak up about it and be an advocate and be energized,” she said, adding, “and carry that energy through to the movement.”

Top Image: Ballet Hispánico's Melissa Verdecia in "Con Brazos Abiertos." Photo by Paula Lobo.