

# Arts groups get 'Fresh' air

By Molly Glentzer | March 21, 2004

It's hip to be fresh. Just ask the small and midsize Houston arts organizations who belong to the Fresh Arts Coalition.

Fewer than two years after **Marita Fairbanks** founded the nonprofit collaborative to provide marketing support for several of Houston's small and mid-size groups, four more have hopped on the bandwagon. Founding members give Fairbanks a big thumbs up, even though few of them have measured a box-office increase from Fresh Arts advertising.

The Web site -- [www.fresharts.org](http://www.fresharts.org) -- describes the group's 19 members as a collaborative of "the quirky organizations that make Houston's arts scene one of the most dynamic in the country." They include visual, performing and literary arts groups -- some ultra-edgy, some traditional.

The new members include the Foundation for Modern Music, which promotes the work of living composers; the contemporary Suchu Dance; Mercury Baroque Ensemble, which performs 17th- and 18th-century music on period instruments; and Talento Bilingüe de Houston, the city's largest Hispanic arts organization.

Coalition members pay a small percentage of their annual operating budgets for listings in Fresh Arts' brochures and advertising and on its Web site. Collectively, they have more buying power.

"Ads in the Chronicle, the New York Times and on KUHF are things we wouldn't have in our own budget," says **Andrea Grover**, director of the micro-cinema Aurora Picture Show.

**Lisa Haymes**, managing director of the avant-garde theater troupe Infernal Bridegroom Productions, is one of the few members who thinks Fresh Arts has brought new bodies to the box office, mostly through an e-mailing program.

"Their brochures go faster than anything else in our lobby," she adds.

Others value less tangible benefits. Mercury Baroque artistic director **Antoine Plant** joined for the networking possibilities.

"We have a lot in common," he says. "It's real easy for us to do advertising exchanges in our programs, and it brings us closetogether so we can do collaborative productions."

"Synergy is the benefit for us," says Inprint administrator **Kristi Beer**. Her literary organization recently provided a poet for an Orchestra X concert through Fresh Arts networking.

"Just the energy you get from people at similarly sized organizations is important," Beer says, "because sometimes you feel isolated in the arts."

Opera in the Heights general director **Reba Kochersperger** concurs. "We now have 19 potential partners," she says.

Several coalition members say Fairbanks' energy and connections are the key to Fresh Arts' success. Her Web site not only has calendar listings and information about members, but an online boutique.

Fairbanks scored a promotional coup last Christmas, getting the upscale boutique Tootsie's to devote its window decorations to Fresh Arts members.

"That's something I would never have thought to pursue or had the time to do," Kochersperger says.

"We're all dancing as fast as we can to produce our own work, but Marita has no other agenda, no other organization to support, and she uses her energy to keep the momentum going."