

# Singing the “Blue Hair” Blues?

How theatre companies are working to attract younger audiences

by Stephen Peithman

Theatre audiences are aging. According to a report by the National Endowment for the Arts, arts attendance has declined along generational lines due to a "massive shift in taste and tradition" as pop music and mass culture displace the traditional performing arts.

This shift, while not uniform in all areas of the country, even has taken on a name: "Blue Hair Syndrome." This is not to suggest, of course, that there is something intrinsically wrong with older audiences. Rather it reflects the concern that if theatre is to thrive it must keep current audiences while pulling in younger patrons in increasing numbers.

We asked performing arts organizations around the country what they are doing to broaden their audience appeal. Here's what we found.

## **Working with Schools**

Bringing plays to the schools introduces youngsters to live theatre, and thus makes an important long-term contribution. However, a program that brings students to the theatre has greater potential for audience development. Why? Because young people see a play in a fully-equipped theatre--*your* theatre. Since it's often their first experience their excitement and enthusiasm generates positive word of mouth about you. Their parents and teachers become familiar with you as well, including where you're located. Bringing the student to the play helps build the theatre-going habit.

That's why the Asheville [NC] Community Theatre offers morning matinees to area high and junior high schools in February and April. ACT staff members provide teachers with study packets for use in the classroom prior to performance. ACT's offerings are not typical student fare, either, but plays such as *All My Sons* and *Marvin's Room*. Student admission for the daytime matinees are kept low, with free admission for teachers and chaperones.

The Caldwell Theatre Company, in Boca Raton, Florida, has had a Theater for Schools program since 1987. Theater for Schools productions are performed without charge on weekday mornings each fall. After the performance, students participate in a question-and-answer period with the actors and production staff. (Caldwell actively solicits corporate and individual donors for the program.)

A similar case is the Adopt-a-School Program of the Paper Mill Playhouse in Milburn, New Jersey, which has allowed 3,000 local students to see a season of six shows without charge. (Talk about building the theatre-going habit!) A discussion before the shows to help the youngsters feel welcome and better understand what they are about to see. They also meet the directors, performers and set designers. Last year 12 schools were involved in the basic program, which runs in a three-year cycle. Youngsters begin as sophomores and continue through their senior year. In their final year, participants are asked about their personal theatre interests, so that Paper Mill can bring in artists to teach master classes. The theatre has followed up with an artist-in-residency program that allows young people to write and produce their own theatre pieces.

## Special Youth Programs

Paper Mill's move to its own program reflects the growing interest in efforts outside the classroom, actively involving young people in productions.

"Our theatre has always been a welcoming place for kids who don't do sports," explains Pat Kight of Albany [OR] Civic Theater. "Drama teachers at both our local high schools feed their kids into our program, particularly the ones who are having trouble with motivation. They often start out working backstage, and we're not afraid to give them responsibility. We've had a 13 year-old running lights--and quite well, I might add. A recent assistant director was 16 and so competent she's scary. They bring in their friends, too."

Recently the company has begun to offer tuition-based acting and stagecraft classes for elementary and secondary school students. Results have been good, not only for the schools, but for the theatre company.

"Many of those kids have begun bringing their parents to see their shows," Kight reports. "Many of those parents will return on their own for our other productions."

Another theatre company that gets youngsters involved is Connecticut's Crystal Opera, which offers a youth opera program.

"Children, mostly teens, are introduced to opera," explains David Zack. "They perform, they tech, they sing in the choruses of major operas, and even produce student operas. This is the best way I've seen of introducing the next generation to the performing arts, and it also brings their parents to see the shows."

The director holds discussions during which the youngsters deal with the history of the opera, the composer, the production, the context, and the period of the piece. The company's guest artists are invited to participate, and most are willing and eager to share their experience.

"The kids are encouraged to do additional research," Zack reports, "and boy do they! Every year we attract more kids and every year they are younger."

## Out of the Rut

Working with young people is an investment in your company's future. So is broadening the audience base to include young adults, particularly those 25 to 40 years old.

Pat Kight of Albany Civic Theater, reports that when she first began working with the company, "the audience pretty much fit the blue-hair cliché--lots of loyal, longtime patrons who were getting old enough that they packed the matinees because they don't much want to go out at night. We used to have Thursday-night shows where there were more people on the stage than in the house."

Such a situation leads to stagnation in many cases. As Douglas Langworthy notes in an article in *American Theatre* (see sidebar, page xx), "the harsher economic climate for the arts has caused theatres to become more reliant than ever on box office income and hence their audiences. A theatre's need to hold onto the audience at all costs--afraid of alienating anyone--can amount to a form of self-censorship, preventing it from making risky or demanding choices."

The Albany theatre, however, began doing newer, more challenging plays, and making some effort to market them to new audiences--the nearby university community, for instance,

"We do nine to ten productions each season," Pat Kight explains, "so there's still plenty of room for old standards. But what surprised us is that our older patrons turn out for the unusual stuff, too. I'm not saying we're wildly avant garde, but we do try to stretch ourselves--and our audiences--a little. We run in the black, by the way, with no government or grant support. In a town of 32,000 people we're filling 10-11,000 patron seats a year in a 160-seat house."

What the Oregon group discovered is mirrored in the research of Bob Johnson, a graduate student at the University of Maryland, whose research has found that to attract younger adults, a company must start with the selection process.

"Young adults want to attend plays that have name recognition," he says. "Something that has been a pretty popular movie, for example, has a better chance at getting those younger audiences into the theatre. If they don't know the play, they want to know what it is about. A focus group I conducted asked for synopses--similar to those that appear on the back of video boxes--to be included on posters and other promotional material."

### Other Strategies

David Hansen, who is 27, was brought to Dobama Theatre in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, in order, he says, "to get a new audience in the seats. Dobama Theater has a reputation for producing the newest plays by established and emerging playwrights and its productions are professionally executed. However, its audience is, for the most part, the very same people who started with it 35 years ago. Artistic Director Joyce Casey wanted to turn things around."

Hansen's created a late-evening series called Dobama's Night Kitchen, whose mission is "to produce original works by today's younger artists that are socially relevant, entertaining to experience, and inexpensive to produce and attend," he explains. Curtain time is 11:00 p.m. following Friday and Saturday night mainstage performances.

The first production was *Bummer*, an original work detailing the real-life traumas of growing up in Cleveland during the late '70s and early '80s. The production was co-written by an ensemble of young artists under Hansen's direction. This was followed by two editions of *The Realistic World*, a self-titled "experiment in improvisation."

In April Dobama's Night Kitchen produced two one-acts, one by George Bernard Shaw, the second a new play by Sarah Morton, two "complimentary pieces pertaining to public funding for the arts," Hansen says. All Night Kitchen performances cost \$6 or less to attend, and none are more than 90 minutes in length.

Imagination and a good dose of marketing savvy can make a difference. In Allentown, Pennsylvania, for example, The Theatre Outlet offers a series called "Counter Culture" on Mondays in which different forms of staged productions are performed in a cafe-type atmosphere. Admission is usually around \$5 and attracts high school, college and young adults.

Lower prices are a must if a theatre is to attract younger audiences, particularly families. A family of four or five will have a hard time going to the theatre if tickets are expensive. And young people, without much experience in theatre-going, are not likely to experiment if the price is high. Thus, Many companies offer lower prices for at least one performance, as well as pay-what-you-can nights, two-fers (two tickets for the price of one), and student rush (half price tickets 15 minutes before curtain). All these are excellent options to keep theatre affordable to younger audiences, and thus build the theatre-going habit.

And since the price of hiring a babysitter is enough to deter some parents, Center Stage in Baltimore, Maryland, offers a series called 'Child's Play,' which provides play-related activities for two to ten year-olds while their parents see the show.

Ideas like this, and the others we've reported here, are only the tip of the iceberg. Every theatre company should examine its own efforts to encourage new audiences. After all, the future of theatre is what we make it.

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