

WALL STREET JOURNAL - November 3, 2014

What It Takes to Keep a Community Theater Running

Just Breaking Even Means Constantly Searching for Funds and the Perfect Formula

By Kevin Brass

All the world may be a stage, but theater is a tough way to make a buck.

Lots of people dream of starting a local theater. It's a way to get into show business on their own terms or share their passion for live performance with their neighbors—and perhaps make some money doing what they love.



Aspen Community Theater puts on one show in the fall, like this production of “My Fair Lady.” Stuart Huck

But raising the curtain can be much more of a challenge than they imagined. Typically, they end up having to scrimp, save and beg to stay afloat. They survive on ingenuity—cobbling together public and private funding, low-cost attention-getting stunts and strong local support.

“Putting on a show can be fueled by great, infectious enthusiasm, but creating an organization to sustain a series of shows and build a place in the community takes much more,” says Julie Crawford, executive director of the American Association of Community Theatre.

Here’s how three theaters of different sizes, ages and budgets used different strategies to beat the odds. None of the people running them are getting rich off the endeavor—most of the theaters struggle to break even—but all of them say the chance to be involved with a creative project they love is reward enough.

Ditch the Old Standards

Phoenix Stage Company, Naugatuck, Conn.

Four years ago, Ed Bassett, 51, a costume designer, and two friends with theater backgrounds, Sharon Wilcox and Agnes Dann, decided on a whim to start their own theater.

“We got caught up in our passion and just dove in,” Mr. Bassett says. “We didn’t sit and crunch the numbers.”

They gathered up \$7,000, including money from Mr. Bassett’s retirement account. A few weeks later the \$7,000 was gone. A big chunk of the initial investment went to rent space big enough for 70 seats, in a strip mall. The rest was gobbled up by myriad unexpected startup expenses, including \$3,500 to build a stage—and then rebuild when it didn’t pass city inspection.

They began as many community theaters do, putting on classic plays and an occasional musical, but quickly found that older shows like “The Glass Menagerie” and “Dial M for Murder” bombed. Larger theaters in the area were already satisfying the need for the popular, well-known shows, they concluded.

Now the Phoenix Stage Company is largely ditching musicals and old standards to focus on new productions. A recent call for original material produced 400 submissions. The shows have given the theater an identity—and a loyal audience in this city of about 31,000.

“I think our audiences enjoy being a part of something new,” Mr. Bassett says. “You have to have a niche.”

Still, the group, which produces nine to 10 shows a year, often has a hard time breaking even. “We’ve been on a very precarious edge a couple of times,” says Mr. Bassett, who like the other founders still works at a day job. “We don’t always pay on the first of the month, but we always pay.”

The theater’s annual budget is \$72,500; 90% of revenue is from ticket sales, the rest comes from donations. All the revenue is funneled back into the theater and the many expenses that arise, including rent, insurance, electricians, play royalties and utilities, not to mention the sets and costumes associated with each show.

And the group looks for ways to keep expenses as low as possible. Everyone involved in the theater volunteers their time (although musicians are paid when they do musicals). With deep connections in the regional-theater community, the group borrows costumes, props and sets whenever possible.

For the first eight months of the theater’s history, they borrowed chairs from wherever they could, resulting in a theater full of folding chairs of every kind and color. Eventually they bought seats and the era of mismatched chairs is now part of the theater’s folklore, Mr. Bassett says.

To generate free buzz, they created “tweet seats” during shows. Twitter followers were offered seats in the back of the theater if they agreed to tweet about the show during the performance. Although the promotion is new, the seats have proved popular, Mr. Bassett says.

He and his partners are also frequent speakers at local events. “We’ll talk to anybody,” Mr. Bassett says.

But the most popular promotion may be the free, freshly popped popcorn handed out during the shows. “We’re known for it,” Mr. Bassett says.

Focus on One Big Production

Aspen Community Theater, Aspen, Colo.

After 38 years producing plays in the Colorado Rockies, the Aspen Community Theater continues to wrestle with expenses and a jet-set audience that might leave town for the entire season.

“As the town becomes more transient, it’s always a challenge to reach out and build and maintain an audience,” says Brad Moore, 56, who has been involved with organization since the beginning.

Their strategy is to focus on musicals, which have proved more financially viable than nonmusicals over the years, while trying to develop shows and programs that appeal to a younger audience. The board of directors looks for shows with broad appeal—past productions include “The Music Man,” “Little Shop of Horrors” and “The Producers”—as well as ones with large casts, which tend to draw bigger crowds from the community.

The group produces one show in the fall, before the start of the ski season, and has an annual budget of about \$120,000 to work with. About 30% of that money comes from one major fundraising campaign a year, a mailer targeting its donor base. Revenue from the show covers the remaining 70%.

The donor group has remained steady and loyal over the years, providing the theater with a financial cushion. But with people coming and going from Aspen, it has been difficult to grow the base, despite networking efforts. And, like Phoenix Stage, the theater often lives close to the bone.

“Up to two years ago, we were able to make enough to cover the production and cover annual expenses” such as insurance and storage, Mr. Moore says. “We have just covered the production over the past two years.”

To help raise its profile in the target audience, the theater has started underwriting programming on the local public-radio station and stepped up efforts to enlist sponsors. The group has also started pursuing grants more aggressively.

Meanwhile, expenses continue to rise. An upturn in the real-estate market has made it more difficult to find rehearsal space—often turning to conference rooms in local hotels, restaurants or an old barn—and spots to build sets.

Another big expense: While there is no paid staff, the group, which is all volunteers, has started paying directors, designers and other key production personnel for each show.

“We found artistic leadership is the most important place to put the money,” says Mr. Moore, who works full time for the Colorado Mountain College theater department.

To help cut expenses, the group works with other theaters to build stock scenery pieces that can be used in multiple productions. Local contractors are enlisted to donate construction work.

“There have been many challenges over the years, but there have been a great many more rewards,” Mr. Moore says. “There is a wonderful mix of new and seasoned, young and experienced working on every show. For some it is a first opportunity. For many, it is a third decade of dedication to an organization and to a community, where we get to do what we love with so many that share that same passion.”



The new \$22 million home of Florida's Manatee Players. Manatee Performing Arts Center

Win Powerful Local Partners

Manatee Players, Bradenton, Fla.

Times are good for the Manatee Players. The theater group, which was first formed in 1947, opened a new \$22 million facility last year, funded by donations from community groups and local government as part of a redevelopment of the city's waterfront area. While its roots are in volunteerism, Manatee now employs nine full-time staffers and produces 16 full-length shows a year, usually anchored by popular musicals, such as Disney's "Tarzan" and "Shrek: The Musical."

The group, which is incorporated as a nonprofit, has survived by constantly promoting the theater's importance to the community, says Janene Witham, 43, the theater's executive director. "I'm happy to live in a community that supports community theater, above and beyond."

Things weren't always this way. In the '90s, the theater hit hard times after a series of unsuccessful shows, raising questions about its future. But the group rebounded by focusing on the interests of the community and forming alliances with other community groups, Ms. Witham says. For instance, the Bradenton Kiwanis raised more than \$1.45 million to help build the performing-arts center in exchange for using part of the complex as the group's permanent meeting hall.

The theater surveys its audience twice a year, asking about their show preferences and demographic information. And in recent years, the theater has more aggressively reached out to both the business community and civic leaders for support, focusing on pitches about economic development, sustainability, growth and creating jobs, Ms. Witham says.

The group says it raises enough to cover or beat its budget every year, and starting this budget year is building a capital and cash reserve into its planning. The theater's annual operating budget has grown to \$1.5 million from \$480,000 in the past 10 years. Ticket sales cover about 77% of that, and corporate underwriting has helped defray other costs. The production of "Cats," for instance, was sponsored by a local veterinarian.

Still, the theater looks for ways to trim costs. About \$3,000 a year was saved by bringing production of the playbill in-house. Instead of promoting individual shows, Manatee focuses resources on promoting the entire season and forthcoming shows, Ms. Witham says.

Marketing dollars also have been shifted to more cost-effective social-media efforts. "We've started engaging the younger audience, even though they may only come out once," Ms. Witham says.

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