

A Case for Space

WILL EXPANDING PERFORMING ARTS VENUES MEAN MORE REVENUE TO THE REGION? YOU BET.

WHETHER IT'S IMPROV comedy, traditional theater, an evening of modern dance, classical ballet or a night at the opera, there's no scarcity of quality performing arts groups in Central Florida.

Despite the strong artistic product, the facilities available are often less than adequate.

The lack of quality facilities affects venues, according to Jim Morris, executive director of the Central Florida Performing Arts Alliance, a nonprofit association serving the performing arts. "Whether you're an emerging theater company or have a strong audience base and budget, the area lacks space to accommodate the quantity and quality of performing arts groups," he says.

Morris, whose association manages the 75-seat Studio Theatre to help incubate smaller budgeted performing groups, adds that the space is booked seven days a week. "I could easily manage two more theater venues and rehearsal rooms based on the need."

Terry Olson, arts and cultural affairs director for Orange County, says a majority of all performing arts groups in the area are small. "[We've used] all the facilities quite a lot. As far as a commercial success, 300 seats is the minimum that will help you make it."

NEW PERFORMING ARTS CENTER?

If Kathy Ramsberger has her way, inadequate space will be a thing of the past. As executive director of the nonprofit Orlando Performing Arts Center Inc., Ramsberger, with her team, is leading the charge to study the feasibility of financing, constructing and operating a performing arts center in downtown Orlando. "Orlando has very healthy performing arts organizations," says Ramsberger. It's also the only large Florida city without a viable performing arts center.

While there's the Bob Carr Performing Arts Centre, the space is widely considered to be outdated since the structure was built in 1926 and renovated in 1978. "When you have one hall rather than multiple halls, there just aren't enough dates [available] to do everything you'd like to do. When you have additional performance space, audiences can grow and schedules can grow," says Ramsberger.

Can such a project contribute to downtown Orlando's economy? Ramsberger thinks it can. "When a performing arts center (PAC) is located downtown, the economic energy in that downtown increases. When the PAC is placed on the outskirts of a downtown, the city grows toward that PAC. An arts center is catalytic to the rejuvenation of the cities," she says.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

While construction of a performing arts center is being researched, one facility is currently in the late stages of a four-year, \$3.7 million renovation project. Its completion and availability are providing some alternative spaces. Located in Loch Haven Park, the Orlando Repertory Theatre (formerly the Civic Theatre) has three theaters within its one facility containing 328 seats, 101 seats and 325 seats.

Although improvements remain to be completed (most notably a new roof), executive director Paul Lartonoix says its theaters are "alive and well again," adding, "We cannot forget that this space being open has made it possible for smaller theater groups to have a place to perform."

In addition, downtown Winter Garden is going through a \$3 million renovation of the 70-year-old Winter Garden Theatre, which is scheduled to be completed in 2006. Closed in 1962, the theater became storage space for a tractor company until it was acquired in 2004 by the Winter Garden Heritage Foundation through an operating agreement with the city of Winter Garden.

Foundation board member Becky Stafford says that the theater will seat 300 to 350 people and that she expects it to be used about 200 times a year by college groups and local theater companies as well as for movies and special events. She's confident the theater will contribute a positive economic impact to historic downtown Winter Garden. "We believe that downtown will be a destination spot, not unlike Mount Dora," she says.

This article was written by John Collins, a free-lance writer and Crealde School of Art employee.