

Commentary: Theater company's end carries a bitter lesson

Pat Craig
STAFF WRITER

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Playhouse West's closing announcement came to me with a surprisingly powerful jolt.

And it's something that should make everyone who follows the Bay Area theater scene, and all patrons of the arts, stand and take notice.

When the tiny Walnut Creek company was founded by Lois Grandi about 13 years ago, I was just starting to write about theater for the paper. Lois' was the first theater I'd been around since the beginning. And that was exciting, not only because an intimate, innovative new theater was being born, but because it was the first one to blossom on my beat.

And although I'd worked around theaters all my life, I have come to realize over the years on this job that I knew little about theater when I started.

Back then, my practical knowledge of theater was along the lines of "Field of Dreams." If you do good work, I believed, people will come and your theater will flourish. Theaters that disappeared had merely run out of steam, somehow, or lost artistic direction and simply faded out.

That, however, isn't the case; not with Playhouse West, not with most other theaters. Reality is a combination of artistry, creativity and other things, most of them with dollar signs.

A decade or more ago began a wonderful time for me; a time of being able to spend hours talking about plays and techniques with some of the finest theatrical minds in the world — with ACT, Berkeley Rep and touring Broadway

shows close at hand, I felt I'd been dropped into the greatest grad school in the country. And I was being paid for it. And then there was the local talent; brilliant people who worked and, in most cases, are still working at local theaters with a creative passion that makes my job stimulating and conversation a treat.

I think now of talks I've had with Grandi over the years (and chats I will no doubt continue to have) about our shared affection for theater, her ideas for Playhouse West, and the experiences she had during her time performing in New York. There were notes compared about plays we both loved, and those we didn't see eye to eye on — like "The Fantasticks," which, I told her when she planned a production of the musical, would make me much happier if it disappeared (just the first few notes of "Try to Remember" leave me feeling like tiny creatures are gnawing at the back of my neck).

Mostly, through, the conversations with Lois and the others have been about ideas — big ideas, philosophical ideas, spiritual ideas — the stuff from which good theater creates an irresistible melding of art and thought.

My God, isn't it undeniably clear that good work will pack the house? Shouldn't that be an absolute truth?

I mentioned that thought to a former college drama professor of mine. I'd recently become reacquainted with him after more years than either of us care to remember. He wondered why I hadn't paid much attention to that part of a class one semester when he talked about the realities of running your own theater. A "Field of Dreams" attitude is tempered rapidly with the reality of having to fill seats and pay for a season's worth of expenses.

The sad truth is that in most theaters, the amount you pay for your tickets doesn't cover the actual cost of producing a show, paying the rent and keeping even the most artistic of souls together.

I knew that, although I learned it much later and on this job after seeing friends struggle with those financial realities. Even a theater with loyal fans, full houses and an enviable reputation for excellence, such as Playhouse West has enjoyed, needs other income to survive — grants, contributions, angels, benefactors, or some way to bring in additional amounts of cash on a regular basis.

Playhouse West isn't closing next month because there was something wrong with the work it did or because people have stopped supporting it at the box office.

Nope, it's purely because of money. That was the first thing Lois said when we chatted about the demise. And the news, sadly, didn't come as a particular surprise. Nor, I suspect, did it surprise other theater people in the Bay Area. To something that is financially strapped in the best of times, the dismal financial reports we read every day must be terrifying to theater people.

As you read this, be aware that there are other theater companies in the area seriously hurting for funds. And due to the times, many of the traditional sources of grants and donations are running low as well.

It would appear that some drastic measures on the business side might be appropriate for local theaters to consider right now. In creative enterprises, mergers aren't the most welcome of things, but it might be time to explore areas of shared management, shared promotion costs, joint productions and combination of other operating functions to free up more money for artistic enterprises.

Things do seem to be getting that drastic.

The best things in life aren't free.

Reach Pat Craig at 925-945-4736 or pcraig@bayareanewsgroup.com.