



The Charlotte Martin Theatre lies beneath the glow of the famous "Space Needle."

# The State of Seattle's Theatre

## *A Building Frenzy*

by Peter Stekel

**T**here isn't anyone in Seattle who doesn't remember the travesty that befell the Music Hall Theatre. Even recent transplants know about the downtown theatre being torn down in 1991 to provide space for a hotel that has never been built. Now the vacant lot is slated for a 79-stall parking lot, an ignoble end to a Seattle landmark. Last April it was joined by the 56 year old Showboat Theatre, on Lake Union, demolished because that option was cheaper than restoration.

Judging by the nearly \$100 million frenzy of building and restoration work in Seattle today, these theatres needn't have died. All they needed were financial patrons and people who cared. That's what is saving two other landmark theatres today: The Eagles Auditorium and the Paramount. It's

also helping build four others.

The 3000 seat Paramount Theatre is Seattle's main stage for rock concerts and touring Broadway revivals. This fall it closes down for a \$35 million, six month, refurbishing project. Built in 1928 for silent movies and vaudeville, the Paramount enjoys the largess of benefactor/owner, Ida Cole.

Major construction will add 19 feet to the existing stage and change the street-side load-in area. There will also be new seats, carpeting, and new sound and lighting systems with no plans to alter the Theatre's distinctive facade.

Speaking for Cole, Vivian Philips-Scott says they want to expand the Theatre's level of comfort. "I think the most exciting and anticipated feature will be the addition of restrooms." The Paramount's elaborate mezzanines, waiting rooms, and

lobby attest to an era when people spent half the day in the Theatre. There wasn't a surge of people hitting the restrooms during one intermission like there is today.

Cole has a strong sense of history. Like many Seattle natives, she bemoans the loss of the Music Hall. As one of three surviving historic theatres, the Paramount is a Seattle institution. "You cannot build another Paramount in today's dollars," says Scott-Philips. "This place was built to last."

The limitations of reconvered theatres is driving the plans of A Contemporary Theatre (ACT) and The Eagles Auditorium. They don't want to end up performing in a house suited for meetings of fraternal organizations. ACT is raising \$25 million to remodel the building, a historic 1925 structure built as Aerie #1 by the worldwide Eagles organization.



When they open, in April 1996, according to PR Director Barry Allar there will be two performing spaces, each with a calendar of six plays. "We'll be able to extend a run if a play proves to be popular," which they can't do now on a single stage with tight scheduling. They'll also generate extra income by renting out the space when its not in use.

In a unique partnership with the Seattle Housing Authority, The Eagles will include 44 affordable-rent apartments. In return, the Seattle Housing Resources Group is bringing \$3.2 million to the project.

"We've identified \$11.2 million to date which is fairly firm funding," says Allar, "with another \$7.8 million in the works." Washington State contributed \$1 million and helped put together a \$2.7 million deal with the State Convention and Trade Center who own the building. They plan a public campaign to raise the rest.

Allar hasn't seen problems in raising capital and subscriber funds simultaneously. "We'll be looking for support from donors and subscribers but they realize that we still need annual gifts to maintain the level of quality for our stage."

Without a doubt, there is support for theatre here. The privately funded Corporate Council of the Arts reports that in metropolitan Seattle, with a population of 1.9 million, there are 1.2 million theatre admissions yearly. Season ticket holders account for an impressive 45%. Theatre-goers contribute \$29 million to the local economy and assist government and industry with donating \$9.4 million annually.

ACT will keep their present theatre, north of Downtown, for use as work shops and administration offices. "We couldn't move everything without making compromises to the Theatre space," Allar says. "We decided we would rather have two world class theatres downtown," and keep the office somewhere else. They'll be no further than a monorail ride away.

Seattle Times theatre critic, Misha Berson, sees the Eagles and Paramount projects as judicious and creative use of financial resources and space. Survival in any kind of depressed market shouldn't be problematic. "There is a pretty intelligent game plan on the part of these theaters," she says. After all, having two theatres running won't require twice as many subscribers for ACT. They also improve their patron access with enclosed parking provided by the Convention Center which stands next door.

Berson is excited to see what the Paramount and Eagles Auditorium will do to the surrounding area because they are close to tourist venues. "There could be a



Left: The Old Village Theatre housed in a 1914 silent movie house. Bottom: The Seattle Repertory Company's Bagley Wright Theatre.



nice ripple affect for the urban economy." Downtown businesses are already responding to the redevelopment for the revitalization it will bring. And if the proposed \$100 million symphony hall is built downtown, they'll be ecstatic.

At The Group Theatre where multicultural and multiethnic productions are staged, a \$275,000 "small potatoes" renovation of the Center House demonstrates what can be done when artistic creativity is applied to business.

Technical Director Rex Carleton has been with The Group almost since its founding in 1978 as a spin-off from the University of Washington drama department. He says, "Dollar for dollar, we did it more or less at the drop of a hat in a time frame that would unbalance the most stalwart of contractors."

They began in January, 1992, when the University gave them six months to vacate their rental space. A six month extension allowed them time to locate a new home in the Seattle Center, on the site of the 1964 World's Fair. Fundraising began during the spring and renovation got underway in October. By December 31st, their entire administrative staff had moved. By

the end of January, 1993, they were staging their first show, *Snowflake Avalanche*, in a new 300 seat theatre.

They met this tight timetable because Carleton found a small, independent contractor with a reputation for who was willing to work with The Group as partners during the renovation. The theatre crew did the salvage work with the contractor handling the demolition, all electrical, and plumbing. Says Carleton, "We did the carpentry, woodwork, and painting, while continuing to produce a season of theater," without missing a beat.

The money for the work began with \$100,000 from the King County Arts Commission, Boeing, Corporate Council for the Arts, and the State of Washington helped with \$50,000 each. SAFECO Insurance, Seattle Foundation, Allen Foundation, and the Weyerhaeuser Company round out the list of large givers.

The change of venue has affected The Group positively. Subscribers have increased slightly with ticket sales getting better as patrons grow accustomed to a new site. Carleton is intensely proud of what they've done in this remodel. "We did it for pennies on the dollar," he enthuses.





The historic landmark Eagles Auditorium Building shortly after opening in 1925.

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Hartzell says it's frightening to have to budget to near capacity and feels pressured to produce "cash cows." Her philosophy is to have two shows a season with title recognition (e.g. *A Wrinkle in Time*), or a subject with name recognition, or someone working on the show who is known. They also work hard to keep ticket prices down and give scholarships to schools or children who couldn't otherwise afford to go.

The criticism that construction costs were too high with not enough money reserved for productions has been broached. Hartzell replies that SCT wealth is illusionary. "I would love to have a patron like Mad King Ludwig who could tell me, like Mozart, 'Here's a blank check. Go out and write a symphony.'" She feels her most difficult job is always to be thinking of keeping the budget in the black.

The oldest established company in town, the Seattle Repertory Theatre continues to take the lead in staging quality shows. To finance the \$10 million Bagley Wright Theater in 1983, the Rep turned to substantial donations from the Alford and Brechemin families, Boeing, Kresge Foundation, the NEA, SAFECO Insurance, and several hundred Seattle citizens. They were also helped by a \$4.8 million bond.

Benjamin Moore is Managing Director of the Rep and asserts \$10 million is, "Nothing compared to today." He's currently \$5.5 million into raising another \$8 million for the Rep's Second Stage. The only thing keeping the cost below the older theatre is its smaller size.

This new theatre will complete the Bagley Wright Theatre Complex. The Rep has always worked with two performance spaces though they've never had them together. Second Stage will have 275 seats, replacing the 130 seat rehearsal hall they've used the past 11 years. With no backstage space, Moore says, "It's too small and cramped." Yet, he's pleased to add, "Some of our best work is being done there, not withstanding those restraints."

The alternative to expansion is to do nothing, and in doing so, sink out of sight. In order for theatre to maintain itself, it needs capital improvement. "You cannot stage shows in reconverted auditoriums that are not designed for plays," Moore emphasizes. "There are basic things: a fly, wings, and a decent sized stage that must exist if you are going to produce professional theatre."

Moore admits to difficulties in raising money. "You end up conflicting with yourselves by asking for capital funds and subscriber funds from the same people." The tradeoffs are worth it since, in 1983,

Renting stage space never works. Just ask Seattle Children's Theatre, Seattle Repertory Company's Second Stage, and the Village Theatre. Performing in reconverted auditoriums, often with inadequate seating, they have dealt with a lack of wings, fly, and workshops. It's been like trying to paint a house without a brush.

The Seattle Children's Theatre (SCT) is an example of cost containment, vision, and dedication to craft. Artistic Director Linda Hartzell is recognized for her commitment to staging adult caliber productions and SCT is well known for the dignity and respect shown its audience. They don't allow children's theatre to be reduced to its least common denominator.

Raising \$10.4 million to construct the 480 seat Charlotte Martin Theatre was a task Hartzell never envisioned. The need was simple: their old theatre at Woodland Park Zoo was too small and their landlords had identified other uses for the auditorium. Add to that the lack of any theatre infrastructure and the need for a permanent home is obvious.

Starting with an agreement from the Seattle Center to allow building on a site adjacent to the Children's Museum, SCT succeeded in securing a \$1.2 million start-up grant from the Charlotte Martin Foundation. The Kresge, PACCAR, and Kreielsheimer Foundations and Boeing, anted up the building fund by \$2 million, and local government kicked in with another \$5.6 million. Many donations of under \$10 came from families who already support SCT by ticket sales and

participating in their theatre classes. Money was also raised by kids staging plays performed in their backyards.

Hartzell is amused at how her job has evolved since the building fund began. Eventually, half her time became devoted to building the Charlotte Martin Theatre. "Not only planning for it at design meetings with the architect and builders, but out in the community to spread our vision and garner support." Hartzell quickly learned that if you expect community backing, you must make yourself available and be seen frequently so people understand what the Theatre is about.

The result of all this hard work is that contributions have gone up. "Even when times were tight during the recession, people gave generously," says Hartzell. She believes that support came because, "We were conscientious about how the money was spent."

There was a strong desire to incorporate Art as an integral, functional, and practical part of the architecture. Under the state mandated "One Percent for the Arts" program, Garth Edwards was commissioned to design expansive ceramic murals, canopy support brackets, laser-cut handrail panels, and even air conditioning/heating grills. The project came in on time and on budget. Stressing the needs of their young patrons, SCT had play space incorporated into the theatre lobby and left plenty of room in front of the stage for spreading out on the floor. And, who else would have built a quiet room for parents with babes in arms?



the Rep saw a jump in subscribers after opening the new theatre. "You attract people simply because it's a new building."

For Moore, the building frenzy in Seattle means the future is bright because the result is a more vibrant community. "Good Theater breeds more good Theater. My feeling is in the last 30 years, we have proved that in Seattle." Los Angeles area residents saw evidence of that last fall when the Rep's production of, *Conversations With My Father*, with Judd Hirsch, and directed by Daniel Sullivan, played the Ahmanson Theatre.

Now, it's being proven in the Seattle suburb of Issaquah where construction continues on the new \$6 million Village Theatre. The non-equity company is noted for Broadway musical revivals. Issaquah is an affluent agricultural town, a cultural satellite of its much larger neighbors. It isn't unusual to see logging trucks and Cherokees waiting side-by-side at stop signs.

Executive Producer Robb Hunt says when the new \$6 million Village Theatre opens in November, they will have a 500 seat house with a full scene and costume shop, three rehearsal spaces, company offices, cafe, and bank. Patrons will be pleased with how their money was spent too. According to Hunt, "We have an amazingly cost effective project."

Insuring that money isn't wasted underlies all new theatre construction. No one wants to see ticket prices rise. At the Village Theatre, "We haven't planned to increase admission or season ticket prices," says Hunt, to pay for a 30% increase in operating costs. They plan on increasing the number of subscribers instead.

With nearly 75% of their construction budget raised, the Village Theatre is struggling to raise the rest. Building has affected annual fundraising because people are donating to the capital fund. For that reason, Hunt says, "In the immediate future we're looking at a deficit."

Their biggest contributors are corporations familiar to theatre-goers in the Seattle area. SAFECO Insurance, Microsoft, and Boeing have kicked in with \$60,000 to \$300,000 over the past three years. Major individual gifts of \$50,000 to \$100,000 have come from the Drietzler Family, Allen Foundation, and Frank Gaudette. The Washington State Corporate Council contributed \$900,000. King County Motel/Hotel taxes have contributed \$1 million. Hunt is quick to mention that the project contributes back to the State because, "Everything that goes into the building is taxed at 8.2%, including labor."

Hunt's delighted with what the new building will allow the Village Theatre to do. First, "We'll be able to increase salaries." They will also hire twice the actors, using the old theatre as a Second Stage. "Actors will benefit dramatically from our expansion."

Berson, at the *Seattle Times*, isn't as enthusiastic. "Not wanting an equity contract could come back to haunt the Village when they expand production," since union members can't perform in the non-union house. With two theatres running concurrently, it could be a pinch to find enough professional actors.

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This construction frenzy comes amidst distressing news released in last April's *American Theatre* magazine. "Theatre Facts," the annual survey of non-profit drama institutions, shows the income surplus of \$1.2 million shared by 177 companies in 106 cities five years ago has become a \$5 million deficit. The Theatre Communications Group-sponsored survey reported a total audience of 16.5 million during 1992-93, a 1% decline from the previous period. Nearly half the theatres reported subscriptions had dropped, that state and federal support fell by 8% and 11.4% respectively, and that earnings grew by less than 1% above the rate of inflation.

The bad news hasn't seemed to hit here yet. Seattle theatres are growing because they practice fiscal restraint. They've also been more secure by relying on themselves, not on public grants which can easily disappear as they did recently in California. To Misha Berson, "It's clear that Seattle has a thriving theatre community relative to other cities its size." And, theatres are learning to take advantage of the discrepancy between what is available for capital improvement and artistic underwriting.

These theatres are operating with a vision that will take them into the 21st century as strong, viable, businesses. They realize that when Art is opened to the world, it becomes a business. Art needn't be compromised to keep its spirit alive and maintain stability. What it takes is an openhearted public that realizes Art exists to enjoy and be shared.

This immense amount of support for theatre in Seattle allows theatre companies to apply their artistic vision and newly acquired business skills to prepare themselves for the coming millennium. In an era of shrinking public and private support for the Arts, how many other places can make that same boast? □



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