

The theater cauldron bubbles

In addition to last week's Broadway By The Bay reorganization and rescue by Fox Theatre owners Eric and Lori Lochtefeld, a number of other mid-Peninsula theater companies are also making -- or already have made -- changes to keep their operations going.

TheatreWorks is moving from its Menlo Park offices to a new, non-profit center in Redwood Shores. Bus Barn Stage Company in Los Altos has seen the departure of long-time artistic director Barbara Cannon. Hillbarn Theatre in Foster City is forging alliances with other Bay Area arts organizations such as the Diablo Ballet in Walnut Creek, the Fremont Symphony Orchestra in Fremont and Notre Dame de Namur in Belmont.

And tiny Dragon Theatre in Palo Alto is leaving its Alma Street location when its lease is up at the end of the year to move into a larger space on Broadway in Redwood City (less than a block from the Fox Theatre). Dragon's managing artistic director, Meredith Hagedorn, says renovations just got underway at the new location, which will increase the house size from 42 to 75 seats, as well as add rehearsal and classroom space.

Dragon just completed a successful matching funds campaign, so it's more than halfway (\$210,000) toward the \$400,000 needed to open the new theatre in January.

"We still have a long way to go to reach that amount and we're still getting pledges in, but we'll be spending nearly all of the \$400,000 in the next four months, so we're out there, trying

to get the buzz going," says Hagedorn. "We're telling people, 'We can't thank you enough ... please don't stop!'"

TheatreWorks' decision to move its rehearsal hall, classrooms and administrative offices is "strictly a monetary one," says managing director Phil Santora. He credits a "wonderfully generous" offer by the Sobrato Family Foundation with enabling TheatreWorks to increase its footprint to nearly 39,000 square feet -- and save money in the process. The move will take place in October.

At the same time, Santora says he has located a 20,000-square-foot warehouse space in the East Bay, so the TheatreWorks scene shop will be moved across the Dumbarton Bridge. "We need a space that is taller than standard and wider between columns, which I wasn't able to find on this side of the Peninsula," he explains.

TheatreWorks' lease in the Menlo Park industrial park on Hamilton Court is on a year-to-year basis. Santora says he was looking for something "more stable and long term."

Recognizing that affordable office and workspaces are difficult for nonprofits to find and retain in Silicon Valley, where costs are among the highest in the nation, the Sobrato Family Foundation converted three Silicon Valley office business parks into multi-tenant nonprofit centers. Besides the one on Twin Dolphin Drive in Redwood Shores, the others are in San Jose and Milpitas. The Redwood Shores complex already houses the Strive for College Collaborative, SVForum, Notre Dame de Namur University, My New Red Shoes and Casa of San Mateo County. The TheatreWorks grant of \$769,158 is by far the largest in both value and space occupied.

Says Santora, "This is a net gain for us, and we couldn't be happier. It's just very generous."

But not all theater organizations are feeling the same kind of love. Before Cannon left Bus Barn on Aug. 10, to move to Sonoma County and learn to train service dogs, she said she didn't want to "air Bus Barn's laundry in public," and declined to be interviewed.

Cannon spent nearly 13 years at Bus Barn, not only overseeing the entire business operation but also directing two or three plays a year and handling its marketing. According to box office manager Nada Monaco-Angell, Cannon "will be greatly missed in the community. She's given so many people a chance onstage and backstage. I'm a backstage person, and she took me on and taught me so much."

Diane Tosca, owner and artistic director of The Pear Avenue Theatre in Mountain View, says she has a tremendous amount of respect for Cannon. "I've known her on and off for about 15 years -- mainly by seeing her in professional settings -- as an actor myself and fellow artistic director. I have a ton of respect for her and know that she has earned a large group of devoted friends. "

Bus Barn Board President Vicki Reeder characterizes Cannon's departure as a "change in our business model. We hired a new managing director, Gary Landis, last February, so we aren't replacing Barbara, but we are hiring a part-time production manager."

That would be Dan Wilson, who started this month and is already hard at work setting up season auditions and finding production staff.

"The last four years have been very tough for theaters," says Reeder. While she doesn't think theatergoers will see a noticeable change, she says the board decided to use the money that formerly went for the artistic director's salary to "do more marketing. We will put up banners, that sort of thing. Theater companies reinvent themselves all the time," she says.

Acknowledging that the majority of people who attend theater "tend to have gray hair," Reeder said "we're hoping to do more outreach to the community, bring in some younger theatergoers and improve the audience experience at Bus Barn. That's definitely one of our priorities."

Unlike some other theaters, Reeder says they get little or no foundation grant money, and the theater had the "misfortune" of losing its Foothill Arts Alliance Program a year or two ago. "That was \$30,000 -- 10 percent of our budget. Ticket sales typically are 65 percent to 75 percent of a theater's income, but for us they're pretty much 100 percent. Yet that only pays for half of all our costs."

Despite all that, Reeder points out that "Bus Barn has never been in debt -- and this is our 17th season."

Likely the most innovative approach to easing theater money problems is the one taken by Hillbarn Theatre's Lee Foster. With two master's degrees (business administration and fine arts) under her belt, Foster says that money management is "what I'm best at."

Hillbarn also has a leg up on many other theater companies, because a few years ago "We paid off the mortgage on our building. It's a wonderful feeling not to have that hanging over your head."

Foster says Hillbarn restructured its management team a few years ago. Since 2009, she's been both running the stage end and the business end. In February she hired Tyler Bennett as Hillbarn's associate artistic and development director. "The two of us and the technical director are the only full-time employees," she explains.

While ticket sales for Hillbarn's recent musicals have been "fantastic," she says she decided to put together alliances with other companies. Most are fine arts organizations, but Foster says they will work with any group that needs assistance with what she calls "front of house services" like ticketing, box office services and marketing.

"We already have the infrastructure to support organizations that can't afford them, and it incrementally provides more work for our part-time Hillbarn staff members," Foster explains. Hillbarn has also begun offering what she terms "one-offs": one- or two-night performances such as its annual show tunes sing-along, BATS (Bay Area Theater Sports) Improv, and the recent "Mack and Mabel."

"As a nonprofit community theater, we get no foundation support," says Foster. "Our money comes from our ticket sales and donations -- that's it. So these collaborative agreements, like the one we just announced with the Fremont Symphony Orchestra, provide us with the means to continue -- even in difficult economic times."

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