

Art Center Theater is helping fill need for Santa Cruz County

By ANN BENNETT

Theater art in Santa Cruz County has foundered and recovered many times over the years. Each time, just when it looks as though the last curtain call is for real, the ghost of Theater Past rolls over in his grave and moans, "The show must go on."

One of the main problems that has constantly plagued producers is the lack of an adequate theater building. There's no shortage in this county when it comes to talented theater people, but it's long been a real challenge to find a place to put on the show.

For three years, the Art Center Theatre in Santa Cruz has been working hard to offer a solution to that problem. The theater, which seats 80 at best, is not a final solution. Theater art in this county needs more — much more. But until a respectable theater complex becomes a reality, the Art Center Theatre offers a stage, advice and expertise to the would-be producer, in addition to producing its own three or four major shows a year.

The theater began in 1977 in a back room facility of the Santa Cruz Art Center, the brainchild of Christopher Notley. By 1978, with "zero funds" but a lot of confidence, the theater enlarged and became known as the Center Street Theater. In 1980, Notley's fledgling theater has come of age: reasonably secure financially and committed to providing a dramatic service to the community, the time came for clarification of its management and goals, and

this reorganization has launched the Art Center Theater into the new decade.

The newly named theater is only one aspect of the Arts Resource Center (ARC), which offers advice and expertise along with technical assistance to a wide range of art: theater art and arts workshops, Art Center exhibitions, and a technical program for art and arts projects. A committee of five members of the ARC manages the theater, and while the ARC retains financial and legal control, the committee — made up of Patti Oblath, Chris Notley, Richard Magruder, Bob Marshak and Jeanne Travers — has artistic control and is the decision-making body for the theater.

Discussing the future of the Art Center Theater and of theater in general, committee members Notley, Magruder and Travers emphasized the need for a better facility and for the cooperation of all theater groups.

"We need to work together," they insisted. "The theater companies in this county are essentially homeless. We all need management organization. We need a facility and lots of cooperation."

Travers elaborated by pointing out that it's next to impossible for theater to be self-supporting. "Besides a theater building, we need more individual grants for productions. But it's necessary for all theater groups in the community to work together."

The Art Center Theater is

both a facility and a production company. "We expect to produce about four — or a maximum of five — major productions a year ourselves," explained Notley, "and in addition, we make the space available to any group for other productions."

A theater company interested in producing a play must present its ideas to the committee, which meets weekly. "We're always looking for new ideas, new talent, new productions," said Magruder, explaining that the committee evaluates possible work in terms of its artistic value, the group's capability, and the overall contribution to theater. "We help them in more ways than just making space available," Magruder went on. "We will give advice, help with technical problems, and assist with promotional and organizational problems."

The committee feels that the theater is over its worst hurdle. "Now that we know we can survive, we need to do more long-range artistic planning. We need more control of productions in the future, and need to coordinate it more carefully."

The theater has proven extremely versatile and the management has set up a scheduling system that utilizes time and space. The facility is available to "new wave" bands on Mondays, with a comedy showcase on Tuesdays. The Santa Cruz Street Performers Guild has Wednesdays, and Thursdays are open for slide shows, lectures "or whatever."

Weekend slots are filled with regular dramatic offerings of their Art Center or other companies.

"We're a showcase for local talent," said Notley, "and that includes playwrights, directors and actors. We're open to new material and new ideas. We like experimental theater, in the sense that it addresses itself to contemporary morality and politics." Added Magruder: "We not only provide good theater, we also provide a good training ground."

The recent Playwright's Festival is an example of their goals. "There are so many authors and so many scripts — but no place to produce them," explained Magruder.

Notley said the four-day experiment was not financially successful but a "rewarding experience for everybody involved. We plan to do it again, and maybe even regularly."

The main goal, however, is to be a service not only to the artistic community but to the community as a whole. Confident of the quality of their art, both visual and dramatic, the ARC looks forward to success. The summer productions include Beckett's "Endgame" and Sartre's "No Exit." (For ticket information, call 425-5211, Ext. 202.)

After that, the theater is looking for the best that the community has to offer. It would be nice if the community could offer a decent theater to work in, but until that happens, the show goes on at the Art Center Theater.