



Unless someone comes up with some money, this stage will soon be dark.

Staircase—a theater with problems

Those in show business readily agree there's no business like it, except when it comes to money. Then it's just like every other business — if there's not enough money, you go under.

That's about where the people who run Staircase Theatre in Soquel find themselves. An ever-deepening financial crisis has brought them to the point they'll have to close the doors on the only live theater still operating in the county, unless they get some financial first aid immediately and some long term financial care in the future.

W. Terry Poland, administrative director for Staircase, has asked the county board of supervisors for \$1,000 immediately so it can mount a Dec. 10 production of the hit musical, "Gypsy." That would take care of the first aid.

On a long term basis, Poland would like the city of Santa Cruz and the county to give \$500 per month each to help keep the theater operating.

The city of Santa Cruz, Poland said, "gave \$40,000 to a town clock and \$225,000 to the golf course—why can't they give to the theater arts. Aren't they a priority, too?"

In a letter to Supervisor-elect Phil Baldwin, and the man he is replacing, Supervisor Dan Forbus, Poland declares, "Live theater is dying or is already dead in Santa Cruz. If the Staircase Theatre, which is the only remaining theater performing here on a community-professional level, is allowed to close its doors due to a lack of city-county involvement, there will be no theatre left in the county."

It is up to the county, city and community at large to rise to the occasion and support the non-profit, tax-exempt organization, Poland declares in his letter.

"Can the citizens of this area donate portions of their tax-deductible (donations) to help keep theater alive and performing in Santa Cruz? If not, it is with great reluctance and sadness that I, as administrative director of Staircase Theatre, must announce the closing of a very special and hardworking theater — the last to go in the county. And I say: SHAME ON YOU SANTA CRUZ."

Staircase came under new ownership in 1974 when Karen Weinschenker purchased it from Jim and Peter Heth, who organized it in 1971.

As a non-profit, tax-exempt organization, it is run by a board of directors including Mrs. Weinschenker, Norman Pasenti, Louis Kaiser, and Ellen Himmelfarb, who is also co-producer in the organization. Another director, Art Zimmerman, has resigned.

But Poland says it is a "non-functioning" board of directors, "formed with the intention it would not interfere with the theater."

Mrs. Weinschenker, as producer, selects the shows the theater will mount and determines salaries.

It takes a staff of about 15 to operate the theater. This swells to 30 or 50 persons, depending on how many actors are needed for a given production.

check and by living in his office.

The only other salaried people are the director of a show, who is paid on a fee basis; the technical director who is in charge of sets and costuming, and who gets \$100 a week; the master carpenter, who gets \$50 a week; and photographer at \$37.50. This leaves little for the co-producer, costume mistress, graphic artist, two box office people and the house manager.

Nor are they profligate when it comes to building sets. Poland says they spent \$5,000 for the entire year on sets. "Most theaters spend that much on a single set."

He said that during the past year the operating expenses for Staircase amounted to \$92,000, and salaries were to \$25,000.

"Part of the problem," Poland says, "is that we can't live off the box office." If we did that, we'd have to charge \$10 to \$20 for tickets. We only charge \$2 to \$4.50, which is extremely cheap."

As it is, the box office provides one-third of the needed capital. But if ticket prices were raised to carry the whole project, "people just wouldn't buy tickets," Poland says.

The real crunch came last summer when Staircase staged nine free performances each of "Lysistrata" and "Romeo and Juliet" at Duck Island Theater.

To mount these, Staircase said it was to receive \$2,500 for each of the productions from the city of Santa Cruz. It only received \$3,700, and to make up the difference, it was necessary to use the revenue from the very successful "Man of La Mancha".

From there on, it was all down hill financially for the theater.

Poland says the theater's Soquel location poses a problem in getting money from the city of Santa Cruz, but points out in his letter to Baldwin and Forbus that the \$92,000 it spent last year was spent in the city.

He also said he learned in his talks with county supervisors that "some of them did not know they were able to spend money on the arts."

There are federal and state grants available for artistic projects, he says, but in order to qualify for them, Staircase has to provide local funds on a matching basis. Those matching funds, he hopes, will come from Santa Cruz and the county.

He also says that since it is a non-profit organization, businesses could make donations of money or materials to the theater, and write them off as tax deductions.

The group pays a monthly rental on the theater of \$258, but they also have to rent space for a shop in which sets are built for \$300 a month.

If the play draws a full house, there is no problem. But if the crowds are light, "we can't pay the rent."

Staircase stages the more popular musicals and plays, Poland says, "so that we can acquaint the people with theater."

As it is, he feels "people will come to the theater to see a show they saw a movie of or read a book about, not just because it is theater."

It isn't as if Staircase throws its money wildly away on salaries. The staff went off salary in October, and only two actors have received salaries of \$25 a week during the period since July. Poland illustrates the point with his own case. In order to pay those actors, he said, his salary of \$75 a week was cut to \$18.99, and for that he puts in 60 hours a week. He said he makes ends meet with a \$34 unemployment

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After acquainting the people with theater through musicals and popular productions like "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest," it is hoped people will come back to see the other productions.

"The public is accepting us," Poland says. "they're buying tickets. But we need public support above and beyond that."

In order to put on "Gypsy" an initial royalty payment of \$2,100 had to be made. "That broke us. We couldn't build the sets or make the costumes."

A fund drive was launched, out of which so far has come something over \$300.

There will be a benefit at the Theater tomorrow night at 8 p.m., with local actors and entertainers putting on variety acts. Tickets are \$2, with all proceeds going into the "Gypsy" production.

But there's more to be done than just finance productions. Poland points out that the stage and walls have to be rebuilt and the seats repaired. "They're really bad," he says. And the lighting system was old when the new owner took over and needs to be replaced. Money to do all this might be obtained through a National Endowment to the Arts grant, if only local matching funds would be provided by Santa Cruz and the county.

"I wouldn't be so uptight about this (situation)" Poland says, "if there were three or four other theaters around. But we're the only remaining theater, and we're still going just because we grit our teeth and hold on."