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Fundraisers: Ticket sales, usual donations have slowed

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Fundraisers are not just fun and games anymore. Although arts organizations are still raising donations in a party atmosphere, the scene belies the very real life-or-death financial dramas unfolding in front offices around the region.

This week, two of the area's professional theater groups are banking on community support for much-needed capital.

Capital Stage holds its long-scheduled annual fundraiser, "Get Your Bold," on Sunday at the Blue Cue restaurant and bar. And Wednesday, the Sacramento Theatre Company stages its more impromptu "The Show Must Go On!"

As STC artistic director Peggy Shannon recently pointed out, the company didn't have this event on its radar two months ago. Now it is depending on the proceeds to get the company through the fall season.

"It's part of a financial plan we created about six weeks ago," Shannon said.

The plan came out of an emergency board meeting during which STC's future was squarely on the table. The staff created a plan that includes this event as well as budget cuts and production changes.

"Right now we're just working the plan – both to get through this season and to get to the next," Shannon said.

If regional theater companies needed a sobering reminder of the economic situation, they received one last week in the chilling news of the Foothill Theatre Company's pending closure. The company had restructured itself, changed programming and held numerous fundraising events – but ultimately could not keep its doors open.

Theatre Bay Area, a San Francisco-based regional service organization, recently released a report on the fiscal health of the theater community. It notes that half the theater company respondents, regardless of budget size, expect cash-flow problems this year.

Although the report, based on data accumulated from February to April, doesn't include Sacramento-area theaters, it does suggest a common awareness. The report also said that in the final four months of 2008, year-end fundraising campaigns generated less income than originally expected for 61 percent of the organizations.

Brad Erickson, executive director of Theatre Bay Area, said the report tells him scientifically what the theaters have been saying informally. Income is down in every area, especially contributed income (grants, donations, sponsorships). Most nonprofit organizations operate on a ratio of 60 percent earned income (ticket sales) and 40 percent contributed income.

"Fundraising has become more important than ever" amid faltering ticket sales, Erickson said. "There's a greater urgency to them and a real need for them to be successful."

Stephanie Gularte, artistic director of Capital Stage, said that group's upcoming fundraising event typically accounts for roughly 20 percent of their contributed income for the year. The remaining fundraising sources include individual donations, foundation and government grant, and corporate sponsorships.

"With all of these sources of revenue down and our single-ticket sales experiencing a sharp decline, this single event has become an even more critical component of our fiscal health," she said.

The Capital Stage event features wine, food, live jazz and, most important, silent and live auctions. Last year 140 people attended and Cap Stage raised more than \$20,000. This year it hopes to beat or at least meet those numbers.

B Street Theatre had its annual fundraising event two weeks ago, and managing director Bill Blake was encouraged by the turnout and results.

"In this economy, we were still able to get people out and make the money we needed to make and more on the night. I shudder to think where we'd be without doing it," Blake said.

Though the event was not make-or-break for B Street, its revenues have been down, just like everyone else's.

"We did about \$4,000 less than our fundraiser last year. But last year's was about \$20,000 higher than the year before," Blake said.

STC's goal for "The Show Must Go On" event is \$150,000. Shannon acknowledged it is "incredibly aggressive and ambitious." But she said STC already has raised \$135,000, with money still coming in.

The actual show will feature singing and dancing from various STC-related performers, plus numerous local celebrities. There will be performances by politicians, including state Sen. Darrell Steinberg, Assemblyman Dave Jones and City Councilman Steve Cohn. Mayor Kevin Johnson and City Council member Rob Fong are also scheduled to speak.

Shannon said STC's attitude is to do whatever it takes to keep the doors open.

"Arts groups are looking at not doing business as usual," Shannon said. "If that means doing a fundraiser like we're going to do, then it's that."

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