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Region's live theater manages to stay alive

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Summertime and the living hasn't been easy for regional theaters. But disaster hasn't struck, either, as companies that took preventive measures during spring mostly found their precautions rewarded with survival – which was all they really wanted.

Hardest hit by the economic downturn has been the area's largest theater presenter, California Musical Theatre. CMT, which books and promotes Broadway Sacramento while producing its own summer season at the Music Circus, has had a mixed year that's more down than up.

After a disappointing fall and winter with national touring shows "The Drowsy Chaperone," "The Color Purple" and "Frost/Nixon" having less-than-anticipated sales, Disney showed its might. The five-week spring run of "The Lion King," which featured the region's highest-priced ticket, (\$77.50 with \$136.50 VIP packages), produced a CMT record.

"The Lion King" was CMT's highest-grossing returning engagement ever.

The 40 performances had 88,410 patrons, with the Community Center Theater filled to 99.7 percent capacity for the run. It generated \$5.88 million in gross receipts, exceeding the two return runs of "The Phantom of the Opera" in 2002 (four weeks, 32 shows, 74,796 attendance, 98.9 percent capacity, \$4.18 million gross) and 2008 (four weeks, 32 performances, 74,670 attendance 98.8 percent capacity, \$4.41 million gross).

A good thing it was, too, since this summer's Music Circus season has produced the lowest numbers since the Wells Fargo Pavilion opened in 2000.

Music Circus subscriptions were down 28 percent from last year. For the summer, it had budgeted for 80 percent capacity per show to break even. The season averaged 69 percent attendance (with the last week of "Cats" still to be accounted for) compared with 88 percent for 2008. While still a substantial average of 1,520 people per performance, it was a deflating blow.

"This is not the kind of attendance we're accustomed to," said executive producer Richard Lewis. But the numbers weren't a complete surprise to Lewis, who saw the challenges

forming during lackluster January and February subscription campaigns, along with the national economic situation, the state budget impasse and its specific effect on Sacramento also hurt Lewis' company.

"There was such a tremendous uncertainty about what was going on and people just started to not buy tickets," he said. "I did notice an uptick once the (state) budget got done. The numbers got a little bit better."

The summer's most-attended show was "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers," averaging 84 percent-full houses for its one-week run. The season's most contemporary and least-known work, "Altar Boyz," did the slowest business at 60 percent.

At the B Street Theatre, which produces three different seasons on two different stages, subscriptions have held steady over the past year. Earned income was down 12 percent for the summer period of June 1 through Sunday compared with the same time period for the preceding year.

Managing director Bill Blake said the company reacted in October and again in March when B Street saw the economy in free fall.

"We cut expenses by over 25 percent and felt we still were still delivering the same quality and giving the same amount of performances," Blake said. The company also cut ticket prices.

"We reacted successfully, and we will make it through 2009. And in March that was the goal – make it through 2009."

Capital Stage had a successful run with the world-premiere commission of "Erratica," which ran from July 17 into early August. The company worked with lowered expectations, reducing the run from six weeks to four. Positive reviews and good word of mouth had it considering an extension but ultimately the theater company remained cautious.

Results were mixed elsewhere, with more positive reports than negative. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland reports it is operating at 90 percent of capacity, the same as last year at this time, and it has exceeded revised budget goals in both ticket sales and revenue. Member ticket sales are down while single-ticket sales are up.

The Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival closed Sunday and doesn't have final numbers, but estimated it would be down 15 percent from last year, while little Main Street Theatre Works in Amador County had its highest-attended summer show ever, "The Three Musketeers."

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