

Arts community needs Capitol

Ted Shaw, Windsor Star

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Running a theatre has always been a risky business. The successful ones manage to combine artistic relevance with managerial acumen.

Mario Carnevale, a city lawyer who spends his off-hours running Theatre Windsor, believes the Capitol Theatre is a jewel that must be preserved.

But he also has enough sense to know a change in attitude is needed to keep the Capitol open.



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CONCERNED: Members of the local arts community, Mona el Baroudi, left, Otto Buj, Michelle Mainwaring, Mario Carnevale and Patricia Julian pose outside the Capitol Theatre.

"They complain about losing bingo revenue," said Carnevale. "But we got bingo revenue at Theatre Windsor, too. When we learned it would be cut off, we started to make contingency plans to replace that revenue."

The Capitol's annual take from charity bingos dropped from \$350,000 to \$60,000 last September when the city began to reduce the number of licences it issues.

All the charities and organizations that benefit from such revenue have had to look elsewhere.

A lot of hands are being stretched out, and the Capitol is just one of those in line.

Patricia Julian, the Capitol's marketing director, thinks a special case could be made for the theatre.

"The Capitol is the only operation of its kind in Ontario, and maybe Canada, that doesn't get some sort of municipal assistance," she said.

Other than the \$1.8 million the city ponied up in 1993 to renovate the building at 121 University Ave. W., its involvement up until now has been one of goodwill. This week, of course, all that changed when city council agreed to assess the operation until the end of the current fiscal year on June 30.

At that time, a decision will be made whether to assume control. Between now and then, some tough decisions will have to be made, not the least of which is the future of the theatre as an arts institution. If the city takes it over, the Capitol would lose its charitable status and become ineligible for federal and provincial grants.

Most in Windsor's arts community -- many of whom formed a delegation at City Hall on Monday -- agree the Capitol is an essential part of the downtown core.

"It would be a disaster if it closed down," said filmmaker Otto Buj, who programs Windsor International Film Festival. He did many of the interior scenes for his art film, *The Eternal Present*, in the theatre.

PRESTIGE

The gala opening of last fall's second annual WIFF also took place at the Capitol, and Buj hopes to base most of this year's event in November there.

"Having it take place at the Capitol lends it prestige," Buj said.

The structure needs some minor refitting to function as a movie theatre again, returning to its original purpose. But Buj can envision staging the entire film festival in one place.

Michelle Mainwaring, of MJM Entertainment Productions, believes the city's cultural future could depend on how the Capitol situation plays out.

"I'm sitting here thinking about where we can come up with some money," said Mainwaring, who operates one of the city's most successful dinner theatre franchises.

Three of her murder mysteries are booked into the Capitol in the coming months.

She told city council her productions alone have raised more than \$100,000 for charity, so the wherewithal and the dollars are there.

"I am really concerned about how things are going at the moment," she said this week. "I feel like everything is in limbo."

In July, she'll put her money where her mouth is by staging a fundraiser for the Capitol. It will be on her birthday -- July 7 (07/07/07): "I'm giving them my lucky birthday present."

Mainwaring pointed to the Association of Summer Theatres 'Round Ontario (ASTRO), a collective of 28 professional summer theatres which is on the lookout for more partners.

The organization promotes links with the tourism industry and generated \$40 million in ticket sales alone last summer.

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The city of Owen Sound, roughly a quarter the size of Windsor, recently was named one of the Canadian Heritage ministry's Culture Capitals, and is in line to receive up to 75 per cent of the capital costs (up to \$750,000) of an arts initiative.

"There is money out there," Mainwaring said. "We just have to be creative and aggressive to go after it."

Mona el Baroudi, co-founder of Actors' Theatre of Windsor, is prepared to help identify the needs of the Capitol. She said a team of performers and arts organizations should analyze the theatre's role in the community.

"Theatre is always a risk, but the upside of a strong theatre in a community is enormous," said el Baroudi, who plans to launch a professional summer drama season at the Capitol in June.

"We need to develop a real strategy over the next couple of years," she said. "That involves evaluating the physical state of the premises, upstairs and down. And it means examining the Capitol's mandate."

"Real due diligence is needed and no one person or group of persons can do it. It has to be community-based."

One of the most important elements is marketing a new image, said el Baroudi.

The Capitol's Julian said the theatre's mandate is already undergoing an overhaul. Certain attractions, such as the school programs and the Classic Albums Live series, have sold out in the last year, while others, like the jazz series, are suffering from low turnouts and likely won't figure in future plans.

In recent years, the Capitol has stepped up its co-presentations in which organizations use the technical expertise and facilities of the theatre, but share the costs with the Capitol.

"That is one area where everyone benefits," said Theatre Windsor's Carnevale, whose group staged *Misery*, starring Mainwaring, at the Capitol last fall. It also plans to put another show there in August.

Misery co-star Jason Gale, meanwhile, has put out a challenge to all arts groups to participate in a telethon on local cable this summer.