



Show

DESPITE RECENT STRONG PERFORMANCES AND RENEWED OPTIMISM, HOLD YOUR APPLAUSE FOR THE ARTS. MORE VIRTUOSO WORK REMAINS.

by Kevin Fritz

time

IT'S TROUBLING ENOUGH to find out that Miami spends close to \$1 billion on arts and culture, while the Orlando area squeaks out a mere \$165 million. But to discover that the Black Hills region of South Dakota spends about the same as Orlando can make eyebrows rise even higher.

Black Hills, South Dakota?

Indeed, prior to the historical votes by the City of Orlando and Orange County in August for three venues — construction of the Dr. P. Phillips Orlando Performing Arts Center and the Orlando Events Center, along with the renovation of the Florida Citrus Bowl — funding for the arts in Central Florida was tenuous at best. Then came the much-publicized, ultrascrutinized approval of \$1.1 billion in spending, a move that demonstrated a new passion and excitement. Many people figured that, just maybe, metro Orlando and the arts do make a pair.

In addition, there is further cause for celebration, such as the Orlando Opera's marking its 50th anniversary this fall, plus the yearlong unprecedented success at the Orlando Science Center. New facilities aren't all that's coming out of the ground. Momentum appears to be building, too, right?

Well, not so fast.

There is a caveat. If Orlando wants to be serious about embracing the arts, more money must

be pumped into the arts, not just into shiny new stages, but also into the industry and its cultural organizations. That is the word from Margot H. Knight, president and CEO of United Arts of Central Florida Inc., a collaborative fund-raising organization that since 1989 has invested more than \$91 million in local cultural organizations and cultural education.

Knight notes that United Arts receives only about \$26,000 a year from the state, leaving the member groups to apply for separate grants and funding to fill voids. Any decrease from proposed state cutbacks would have a deep and dark impact.

Call it a reality check.

"We are trailing way behind everyone in our general population service area," says Knight.

Citing the recent Arts and Economic Prosperity III Study, which showed Orlando quite low on the totem pole as far as local economic impact, she adds: "We are closest to Black Hills, South Dakota, which is at \$162 million." The study looked at the economic impact of the arts.

According to Knight, the study also reveals the relative strengths and breadth of the region's cultural assets, based on expenditures of local organizations and audiences. "Of the cities we compete with, based on population, Orlando is looking very youthful," she continues, point-

ing out that Nashville, Las Vegas and Cincinnati are among the locations doing a better job than Orlando.

"We have a lot of work to do," she concedes.

Jim Ireland agrees. Ireland, president and CEO of the Orlando Opera, has big plans to salute the opera's own milestone achievement with special events next month. Even more pressing, though, is the push to ensure the arts in the future. "With the approval of the Dr. P. Phillips Orlando Performing Arts Center, Orlando is ready to assume the cultural leadership of Florida," he says. "But hold your applause, as there is more hard work ahead ... and send cash!"

Jim Pugh, meanwhile, sees opportunity. The chairman of the Orlando Performing Arts Center (OPAC) believes the timing is ripe for full support of the industry. "I think that the glass is half full," contends Pugh, chairman of Epoch Properties Inc. "The fact that we raised \$81 million in six months answers that question." OPAC is charged with raising the money, designing and constructing the new performing arts center and then operating the center once it opens.

Pugh adds that an *Orlando Sentinel* survey concerning the three venues, taken before the vote, showed a 67 percent approval rating for the arts center, higher than the other two projects. "We are going to be Los Angeles in 30 to 40

years,” he says. Notably, he adds that the opportunity brings responsibility, stating: “We have to create enthusiasm and increase attention. It is our job.”

BUILDING A LEGACY

Just how much of a bottom-line impact can the Dr. P. Phillips Orlando Performing Arts Center make? The Arts and Economic Prosperity III Study shows

that the economic impact of the arts in Miami-Dade is currently more than \$922 million annually. The survey, however, was completed before last fall’s opening of Miami’s new arts center, the Carnival

Center for the Performing Arts. Once a new economic impact is tallied, those figures are expected to increase significantly.

Much is riding on similar results here.

Until the arts center opens in four-plus years across from Orlando City Hall, Orlando remains the only metro area of the 30 largest U.S. markets that doesn’t have a signature performing arts center. There’s the Bob Carr Performing Arts Centre, of course. Yet, although it’s somewhat endearing, its age, size and structural limitations prevent the Bob Carr from ever becoming part of the thread needed to weave the arts into the Orlando soul.

As a result of the void, preparations already are under way to ensure that the new structure isn’t only a sight to behold, but that people actually fill the seats — and that the romance continues long after the honeymoon. In other words, once we build it, the people must come.

The effort certainly will be there to make that happen, contends Knight. “Its success is tied to the success of all of our organizations,” she says. “Our fate is all entangled with one another.

“The challenge for us is to support it because it will put us on the map.”

Katherine Ramsberger is intent on literally building a legacy.

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The president of OPAC explains that performing arts centers are currently built to last 100 to 150 years. Moreover, they are using technology in an entirely new way compared with a decade ago, which bodes well for a high-quality life for the building. “Our timing is a blessing,” she says, “It is better for the philanthropic and the technology aspects.”

“We can do it, and we will do it,” vows Pugh. “We are coming of age.”

Not surprisingly, OPAC has a lease to operate the venue for 99 years.

SOMETHING TO SING ABOUT

The Orlando Opera hopes to be around that long. It’s already made it to age 50, and it’s going strong. Each performance draws, on average, about 6,000 patrons, which equals almost 87 percent of its seating capacity at the Bob Carr. And, no, you do not have to dress up if you don’t want to.

Celebrating the Big 5-0 this season, the Orlando Opera started as a Junior League project in 1958, and it wasn’t until 1979 that it became a professional opera company. The anniversary celebration, being made possible by the Darden Restaurant Foundation, kicks off Nov. 16 with a production of “Don Giovanni,” followed by an open house on Nov. 17 that is free to the public.

Ireland, like most in the arts and entertainment industry in Orlando, is looking forward to the new performing arts center — not just for the pure joy of a workable facility, but for the patrons as well.

“The biggest boon will be to our audience,” he says, pointing

to improved seating and sight lines, better restroom and lobby accommodations, enhanced acoustics, and a center aisle.

Ireland adds that, productionwise, the new facility will be a “wonderful advantage” to his enterprise. Currently, the opera is limited to smaller, minimal scenery, because the crowded

FAIR WINDS



COVER STORY

schedule at Bob Carr allows load-ins of sets only on Monday morning for on-stage rehearsal that evening. He notes that most professional opera companies have at least five load-in days. Further,

he says, the Bob Carr has little backstage space for storage of scenery and props of different scenes, requiring the use of more “boring” sets.

“One hopes that better opera produc-

tions will generate greater interest in our product,” he comments.

Ireland is a realist, though. He believes the community must first realize and accept the premise that culture

ORRA



is a needed asset for any successful, growing, vibrant city or region. He says the key to the success of the performing arts in Orlando is to “turn the need into a want as opposed to a want into a need.” And he has faith that the Orlando arts industry has the “chutzpah to pull it off.”

He foresees better productions by the local performing organizations, as well as a greater number of Broadway series touring shows coming to town. In turn, that will translate into a major impact on spending in the region. “I think the arts-related earnings gap between Miami-Dade and Orlando will narrow,” Ireland says.

The real competition, then, will be for performance quality. “This is a much narrower gap and one which we at the opera, the ballet, and the philharmonic are closing rapidly,” he adds.

THE SCIENCE OF MAKING MONEY

Quite apparently, quality hasn’t been an issue lately at the Orlando Science Center (OSC). “We have been winning awards,” says Dr. Brian Tonner, CEO and president of OSC.

Indeed, the science center is at the tail end of its best year ever. Most of the awards come in the



the sting has already been felt from the state's decision not to support a matching funds endowment this year. OSC was to be one of the recipients.

"Funding issues are never behind you," he remarks. "They are always in front of you."

Nonetheless, Tonner is excited about the positive track the arts are taking in Orlando, especially with the approval of the three venues. He says the success of the science center may be a sign that arts and culture in Orlando are experiencing a renaissance, but he agrees the entire industry is in this together.

form of record-breaking attendance. The center possesses the world's largest eight-story movie screen, located in a CineDome that features laser-light displays; planetarium shows and large-format films. It's also home to the renowned Crosby Observatory, which includes Florida's largest publicly accessible refractor telescope for viewing stars, planets, moons and other galaxies. There are permanent hands-on teaching exhibits for children, special events for adults such as "Cocktails & the Cosmos," and blockbusters like "Our Body — the Universe Within" — the primary reason the science center is enjoying a banner 2007.

The show, which allows visitors to see what's inside the body by viewing actual human specimens, generated \$2.5 million in revenues and serves as the signature stroke in a multiyear run of financial fortune.

"We have been in the black eight years now," says Tonner.

Good thing. The science center requires new air conditioning, he adds, along with an exhibit overhaul. Tonner's point: The financial picture is better but not great. Consequently, any proposed budget cuts would still hurt, regardless of the surpluses, and

RSM

DR. P. PHILLIPS ORLANDO PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

► \$376 million, four-story, 400,000-square-foot performing arts center with three venues: a 2,800-seat hall for large-scale productions such as Broadway shows and concerts; an 1,800-seat hall for local performing arts groups; and a 300-seat hall for small performing arts groups.

► The project could include up to 2 million square feet of commercial space; a \$100 million office building (CNL III); \$60 million, 200-room boutique hotel; \$210 million, twin-tower project with 300 to 500 residential condominiums; another \$410 million building with either office space or more residential condos; and new retail, restaurants and entertainment businesses.

SOURCE: PROJECT HOMETOWN

"A rising tide floats all boats," he says. "They are great investments for the future. The Orlando Science Center is just a brick in this edifice."

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

Outside help is welcomed, too, like from tourists. Clearly, they already are helping by paying for much of the venues' costs through hotel-room taxes. Beyond that, Knight believes Orlando is a niche market that combines theme parks with arts. As such, the industry should begin to focus on tourists as an attendance and ticket base for all venues, she says.

As they prepare for the next new generation of arts and culture in Orlando, United Arts and the local performing arts organizations are poised to work on a marketing plan to attract tourists. "We have remarkable opportunities to attract them and to invent tourism in cultural products," says Knight.

The arts industry also can play a role in recruiting newcomers to the area, especially the caliber of people needed for the medical complex being created at Lake Nona. "The new medical

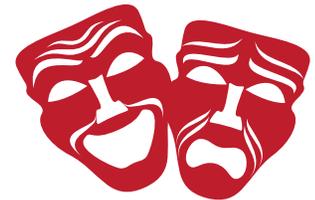
city will bring in thousands of knowledge workers who all have a high interest in educational and family entertainment," says Tonner.

He remembers when he first visited OSC in 1997, and how it made a statement to him and his family. First impressions, he affirms, are very important, and the three venues could serve as the face of local arts and culture.

Yet, area residents must get the message first, concludes Ireland. "It is difficult indeed for outsiders to take Orlando's arts seriously, if we ourselves don't first do so," he says.

So, hold that applause. The new performing arts center is only the initial step in demonstrating that Orlando is serious about top-notch arts. The big vote and subsequent hurrahs were only a prelude.

There is still much to be done. Now, it's Showtime.



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