

THE SAN JOSE CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS: Culture or Crisis

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Introduction

The performing arts have greatly changed since ancient times, however the idea has generally remained the same throughout the centuries and probably will remain throughout eternity. Performances are still given today that show the cultural beliefs of peoples all over the world.

Hopefully the fine arts will remain in the hearts of people for many years to come.

The history of one center for performing arts, the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts, is unique in many ways. It went through so many troubles in the years of its existence, even when it only existed as an idea. It has become important to San Jose's culture as its still gaining popularity shows. Hopefully it will remain a part of San Jose's culture and continue to grow with the city itself.

Approval

There was once an idea for a new center for the performing arts. The first two times the idea appeared on San Jose's ballot, the public voted it down. The third vote in 1965 scarcely got the two-thirds majority needed to approve the soon-to-be built San Jose's Community Theatre. After the first vote in 1961, the approval percentage fell short of the required number by a mere four percent. The second vote in 1964 came even closer to sixty-six and two-thirds percent yet it still fell short of the required number. The third and final vote approved an advisory measure for the construction of a 2,701 seat community theatre.

Expectations

The then San Jose Community Theatre was to be a facility acoustically and visually designed for perfect enjoyment of musical, entertainment, and educational events of all kinds. It was to be a key part of the city's Fine Arts Center that would include a library, art museum and gallery, (approved by the voters in 1961) along with the already existing Municipal Auditorium and Jay McCabe Convention Hall. The Community Theatre was desperately needed to house the presentation of major cultural, educational, and entertainment attractions. Almost twenty-five local performing organizations, including children's groups were hampered because of the lack of proper facilities. The Community Theatre was also needed to enhance San Jose's quality and vitality. It was needed to protect San Jose's economy and tax base. San Jose's leaders thought that if they could not provide these facilities people would go elsewhere, thus ruining the chances of creating new industries and jobs.

Cost and Funding

The original site for the San Jose Community Theatre was one block to the west of the Civic Auditorium. However, it was later moved to the corner of Almaden Boulevard and San Carlos Street. This move cut the annual leasing cost of the land from \$650,000 per year to the lower \$588,575 per year.¹ The funding for the theatre would come from production revenues, gifts from foundations, public-spirited citizens, and a tax rate of about four cents levied on the citizens. The tax rate amounted to about two dollars for someone owning a \$20,000 home. The people who pushed for the construction of the theatre used the success of the Civic Auditorium both financially and publicly to help justify the Community Theatre. Hundreds of individuals, industries, and organizations who supported the construction of the theatre donated money to help make the project possible. An organization of San Jose merchants and businesspeople, the Metropolitan Associates Trust Fund, chaired by Don Goldeen, made a gift of \$100,000 to San Jose to save the Community Theatre project in July, 1969.² The money was used to persuade several subcontractors to extend their bids for the project beyond the expiration date after financial institutions failed to bid on the bonds offered by the San Jose Civic Improvement Authority during a period when the bond market was deterioration nationally. The bonds were later sold and the theatre proceeded as planned. After donations and taxes the remaining money was raised by the sale of bonds. The San Jose Civic Improvement Authority sold

these to acquire the site in the Park Center Project Area and to finance the construction of the theatre.

Design and Construction

After the financing of the Community Theatre was done, the City of San Jose then hired Taliesin Associated Architects founded by Frank Wright of Arizona with Aaron Green Associates to design the plans for construction of the theatre.

The date for the projected completion of the theatre was originally set for November, 1968. This was later changed because of a staff report to October, 1969, but in reality the construction couldn't even be started until August, 1969. In July, 1969, the San Jose City Council hired Barnhart Construction Company to build the San Jose Community Theatre. After some price cuts and increases in the original cost for the construction of the theatre, the final cost came to eight million dollars.³ The building was completed in December, 1971.

Opening

The San Jose Community Theatre opened on Thursday February 17, 1972, with over two-thousand people attending a performance of the opera Aida by Verdi. This marked the beginning of a new era in San Jose's fine arts aspect. Events that the theatre would house were choral festivals, Christmas and Easter observances, conventions, pageants, concerts, music and drama festivals, major speakers, graduations, name entertainers, rallies, mass meetings, seminars, folk, jazz, pop, and Western musical performances, Broadway plays, symphonies, ballets, operas, concerts, drama and dance groups, plays, and local music.

The new theatre was almost booked solid for the first few months, probably due to the low rental rates of the theatre. For a single performance in a day the price for renting the theatre was ten percent of the gross made from ticket sales with a minimum of \$650 and a maximum of \$1,500. If two performances should occur in one day the price for renting the Community Theatre remained ten percent of the gross made from ticket sales, and the maximum cost stayed stagnant however the minimum cost was lowered by fifty percent from \$650 to \$325. These rates were approved by San Jose's City Council on June 28, 1971. The popularity of the theatre helped free other facilities such as the Civic Auditorium for other events. The Community Theatre became the permanent home of the San Jose Symphony after its opening in February, 1972.

The Inside

The Community Theatre could hold anywhere from 900 to 2,701 people. This was accomplished by raising or lowering the movable ceiling which later proved to be disastrous. The theatre was equipped with a fully rigged stage, an automated orchestra shell, adjustable proscenium openings, caliper stages, and extended forestages which allowed for productions of a widely varying nature. The stage lifts were made to work in a number of configurations to provide either an orchestra pit, patron seating, a thrust stage, or any combination of two of the above. The entire theatre was air-conditioned providing comfort for both the audience and the performers.

Important People

Up through the opening of the theatre in 1972 many San Jose officials were responsible for making the theatre possible, among them were:

City Council Members

Joseph A. Colla	Norman Y. Mineta-Mayor	Roy B. Naylor
Clyde L. Fisher	Ronald R. James-Mayor	John Lishel
Alfredo Garza, Jr.	Joseph L. Pace-Mayor	Virginia Shaffer
David J. Goglio	Janet Gray Hayes	Robert Welch
Kurt Gross	Walter V. Hays	Louis S. Solari
	Robert H. Miller	

City Managers

Thomas W. Fletcher

A.P. Hamann

Director of Public Works

A.R. Turturici

Theatre Manager

F. Nicholas Lickwar

Fine Arts Commission

Hugo Bayona	Chester Mason
Will Blessing	Virginia Mitchell
A. Marguerite DeCola	Pauline Pace
John DeVincenzia	LaVerne Randall
Alex Hart	Alice Richards
Earle Lewis	Mary Jane Spence
Richard Stowers	

Metropolitan Associates Board

Don Goldeen-Chairman

George Akers

Bernard Berg

Arthur Lund

Otis Mitchell

Anton Peterson

Howard Rathburn

Architects

Taliesin Associated Architects

Contractors

Barnhart Construction Company

Tragedy

May 9, 1972, three months after the theatre opened, marked the biggest tragedy in the history of the theatre. While being adjusted by two employees of Stagecraft Industries, Incorporated, the movable ceiling, which allowed for the versatility in the number of seats available in the theatre, collapsed. "If there hadn't been two people up there it wouldn't have fallen," said Mayor Norman Y. Mineta.⁴

In April, 1973, the tab for studying the damage caused by the ceiling collapse had reached \$78,000, and it was still getting higher. Ruth and Going and H.J. Degenkolb were hired to determine why the ceiling fell and if it could be reused. They were hired at a cost of \$12,000 each.⁵ H.J. Brunnier and Associates were hired to determine the overall safety of the Community Theatre. They were also paid \$12,000 for their services. Albert C. Martin and Associates were hired to do an analysis of the damage at a fee of \$17,500 plus an additional \$75,000 for plans for remedial measures. Ruth and Going were hired a second time to draft plans for reconstruction of the ceiling. They were hired at a fee of \$25,000. The City of San Jose and the Central Intelligence Agency filed a three million dollar damage suit against Taliesin Associates Architects and seventeen other companies who were involved in the designing and construction of the Community Theatre. Each of the companies who examined the damage would have been paid additional money if they had been called to testify in court.

In 1977, the City of San Jose won a two million dollar legal settlement from the architects and contractors who were involved in building the theatre.

In July, 1973, the San Jose City Council members voted to get rid of the twenty-eight ton movable ceiling that collapsed on the orchestra pit and replace it with a fixed one. The council's decision reinforced one reached earlier in a joint meeting with the Civic Improvement Authority Board. The decision came on advice of engineering consultants who recommended that the movable facility be replaced by one that is permanently anchored to the walls of the theatre. The council's vote on the fixed ceiling was unanimously in favor of the permanent one.

In February, 1974 as part of a \$32,000 contract the movable ceiling that collapsed was removed from inside of the theatre. Authorities were shocked when they saw the results of a study that showed the roof was unstable rather than the walls which is what they first thought. They found out that because of the weakness of the roof, the walls were also unstable, this led to the collapse of the ceiling. As a result, part of the roof over the main auditorium and stage had to be torn out and replaced.

Yet another setback occurred in July, 1974, when the repair work on the theatre was temporarily halted due to a strike by the carpenters and laborers working on the theatre. "We were on schedule until the strikes started and at this time cannot anticipate how long the workers will be out," said Public Works Director Tony Turturici.⁶

Fortunately, the strike didn't last very long, and the repairs were soon back on schedule.

After a six-to-one vote in the San Jose City Council, a \$345,000 price reduction out of the original \$3.1 million price tag for the repairs of the roof and the collapsed ceiling was approved.⁷ This was accomplished by using different bracing techniques for the roof and the ceiling. Another \$140,000 was taken off because the project was finished before any big rains began. After the repairs were completed in 1975, the San Jose City Council hired A.C. Martin, an agricultural engineer, to double check the safety aspects of the theatre.

On November 26, 1974, something fairly drastic occurred that changed the way the Community Theatre was looked at; it ceased to be called by its old name. The new name became the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts. Most people who supported the name change thought the new name was more dignified and identifiable.

On December 10, 1974, the San Jose City Council voted five-to-one to cut the rental rates for the use of the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts in hopes to still be popular after its reopening. This reduced the week night fee from \$650 per night to \$400 per night; it reduced rates on Friday and Saturday nights from \$650 to \$500. For Sundays through Thursdays for a second performance the price was cut from \$325 to \$300. For use of the rehearsal hall the price was changed from a flat \$100 to \$20 per hour. The rental rate for the Founders' Lounge was changed from

\$200 per day to \$25 per hour. "Our one main objective is to see that the theatre is used... to get it filled every night," Gene Sallwaechter, Parks and Recreations Director said, and he added, "We have no illusions about breaking even, what we want to do is have a fee schedule that is competitive with Flint Center, our main competition."⁸

Reopening

After all of the repairs on the center had been completed, it was read to be opened. The official date of the opening was March 13, 1975. Over two thousand seemingly unfrightened spectators attended an eight p.m. jazz performance by Sarah Vaughan. Some daring people including some celebrities purposefully sat underneath the very location where the moveable ceiling had collapsed just to show their confidence in the new theatre's strength and stability.

Jobs and Suicide

In January, 1975, Ronald K. Mesher, age forty-two, became the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts' manager. Among his responsibilities were reopening the theatre after the ceiling was repaired. After six week in the job he resigned because of too much pressure. His successor was William A. McDonald, a forty-one year-old Los Angeles theatrical consultant who was the third theatre manager for the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts in that year. He took over the post on June 18, 1975. His starting salary was \$22,000 per year. His predecessor, Francis N. Lickwar was demoted in December, 1974 after an eight month evaluation of his administrative abilities. McDonald's other predecessor during that year was Ronald K. Mesher.

Until March 14, 1977, William A. McDonald's job performance was considered generally satisfactory. On that date, however, he made a suicide attempt. He had shot himself with a .22 caliber handgun. Because of that incident and failing to improve on a job performance evaluation in 1975, McDonald was fired from his position as the theatre manager. After the job evaluation most authorities considered him worthy of the job; however, almost all of the people found problems in his performance. McDonald was brought to court for many charges primarily involving his worsening job performance. Some of the charges placed against him that were sustained by the court were: failing to prepare adequately for a major convention booked into the city, providing the city with misleading fiscal data, and failing improve on the

1975 job performance evaluation. McDonald claimed that City Hall politics and indifference prompted his suicide attempt. The only charge that remained against him was that of his suicide attempt. The attempted suicide had occurred in McDonald's office with a gun that he carried unlawfully concealed without a permit. He said the only other time he brought his gun to the Center for the Performing Arts was on the day of a Linda Ronstadt concert in late 1975. He said he brought it because of his great concern about the safety of the facilities and to lend support if necessary. The story of William A. McDonald was another example of the problems the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts faced during the years of its existence.

Debt

In February, 1978, the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts kept going deeper into debt. That year the debt totalled \$997,000 including the annual land lease payment of \$700,000.⁹ The first five months of that fiscal year the theatre lost \$415,648 in overall expenses. Many people condoned the debt by claiming that theatres all over the United States don't pay for themselves. Others said that the debt was abnormally high, especially for a theatre the size of the Center for the Performing Arts.

Dan Saunders and the Lighted Sign

Dan Saunders, the Center for the Performing Arts' Manager after William A. McDonald was fired, proposed the twenty-eight by eighteen foot sign that is now on the busy intersection of Almaden Boulevard and San Carlos Street, the same location as the Center for the Performing Arts. The approximate cost for the lighted sign was \$160,000. Because of the large size of the sign, the city granted an exception to its regular limits on the size of signs. "We want to give the impression of activity, which is something we need," said Dan Saunders.¹⁰

"For the price, I think the city really got a nice performing arts center," said Dan Saunders.¹¹

In 1979, both Mayor Janet Gray Hayes and Vice Mayor Jim Self were pleased with the then fairly new theatre manager, Dan Saunders. They commended him on his performance.

Soon after, Dan Saunders got an out-of-state job offer which he took, leaving his job as the theatre director.

Increasing Popularity

The use of the eight million dollar theatre has increased ever since it reopening in 1975. In the 1978-1979 fiscal year, there were 210 event days with 191 commercial events with ticket sales and forty-nine noncommercial events without ticket sales some of which occurred on the same days. This was an improvement over the 1977-1978 fiscal year in which there were 182 event days with 151 commercial events and fifty-nine noncommercial events.

More Problems

During a Greek folksinger's performance in May, 1978, the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts' spectators in the balcony section became alarmed when, while they were stamping their feet and clapping their hands, the balcony swayed. San Jose spent \$11,000 to investigate the swaying of the loose theatre structure. The stiffening of the balcony cost approximately \$550,000.

After a two year study of the safety aspects of the theatre it was forced to close for eight months for minor repairs (at least in comparison to what had been done to the theatre in the past). According to the survey of the Center for the Performing Arts it needed a \$3.6 remodeling. "The safety of our theater patron is our paramount concern," said Mayor Janet Gray Hayes.¹² The San Jose Fire Department found the sprinkler system to be outdated. The replacement cost was \$1.3 million. The seats needed to be replaced at a cost of \$500,000, and the shaky balcony had to be stiffened at a cost of \$550,000. Also needed were proper exit signs, paint, finish and detail repairs, plus labor on all of these repairs brought the cost to \$3.6 million. The repairs were desperately needed because of the popular season in 1979 when more than 400,000 people attended 210 performances including ten by the San Jose Symphony. Some of the safety problems that needed to be corrected were the fire danger of the foam pads in the seats and the aging carpeting inside of the theatre.

In the Summer of 1987, the City of San Jose voted to undergo yet another floor to ceiling renovation of the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts' stage. It took place that Summer and cost approximately \$1.2 million. On June 23, 1987, the San Jose City Council voted unanimously to undergo the renovation of the stage. Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple Computer, donated \$750,000 to help the project along.

Conclusion

The fine arts have been a part of culture for many centuries, dating back to the Ancient Greeks. This was the story of a small but great performing arts center; great both in its popularity and the enormity of its problems. The story of the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts may not last throughout history like the culture of the Greeks has, but it certainly should have a great effect on our culture today.

Notes

1. "Theater Estimate Rises," San Jose News, (8/8/67), p.7.
2. Mike Silverman, "S.J. Community theater--Competition for S.F.," San Jose News, (3/17/71), p.9.
3. John Spalding, "\$8 Million Worth of Theater," San Jose Mercury News, (7/24/69), p.29.
4. Joanne Grant, "Mayor Calls Ceiling Snafu 'People Failure'," San Jose News, (2/14/73), p.1.
5. "Tab for Repairs Still Getting Higher," San Jose Mercury News, (4/14/73), p.3.
6. "Stikes Hold Up Theater Repairs," San Jose News, p.21.
7. "Theater Repair Cost Cut Again," San Jose News, (7/17/74), p.30.
8. Bob Weaver, "Theater Rental Rates Cut," San Jose Mercury News, (12/11/74), p.6.
9. "Theater's Debt Rises," San Jose News, (2/8/78), p.5.
10. "Theater to Get New Sign," San Jose News, (3/15/79), p.8.
11. "The Center for the Performing Arts--Gaining Popularity," San Jose Mercury News, (4/1/79), p.1.
12. Rick Carroll, "San Jose Theater May Have to Close," San Jose Mercury News, (1/15/80), p.3.

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