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ACTS OF SURVIVAL; THE PLIGHT AND
PROSPECTS OF DALLAS THEATRE

THESIS

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By

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A comprehensive investigation examines the decline and changes that have affected Dallas regional theatre development from the dream of Margo Jones in the 1940s to the proliferation of emerging theatres in 1993. Changing economic conditions, lack of audience support, and shortages of performance space have contributed to an exodus of Dallas actors and artists. Reviewed are measures to reverse this trend, including funding changes, awareness campaigns, improved inter-theatre cooperation, and guidelines for audience development. The study's conclusion notes that theatres do, indeed, have a natural life cycle, but with renewed emphasis on audience development and self-sufficiency, theatres in Dallas can endure and contribute to an enlarged sense of civic pride.

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CHAPTER I

The appreciation and cultivation of the theatre are important and fundamental to our cultural heritage. Yet a variety of circumstances in the Texas city of Dallas have recently contributed to the decline of that city's theatre offerings and continued development. The City of Dallas, described in 1962 as "the southwestern city that was leading the way in theatre," ¹ in 1973 as experiencing "a banner theater year," ² and even more recently as the third coast, has lately witnessed a tailspin in its theater productions and continued development. An exodus of Equity actors from Dallas has followed. The possible explanations for this decline in theatrical activity are multifaceted and complex, with economic influences inextricably interwoven throughout. Many of the most profound changes have evolved during the past fifteen years. The prospect of a major metropolitan community destitute of theatre is lamentable, and a community in such a state is worthy of review. A chronicle of the checkered development of Dallas's theatres, as well as the variables that nourish or diminish it, will serve to examine the vital signs, status, and future directions of Dallas theatre.

This thesis will focus on three questions: 1. What

changes in the City of Dallas, during the last 15 years, have affected theatre audience profiles and attendance, influenced production scheduling, and caused the loss of theatre facilities and opportunities? 2. What is the significance of current and longterm theatre losses upon the quality of life and the cultural enrichment of the City of Dallas? 3. If theatre support in Dallas has indeed declined, what are the causes of this loss and possible remedies?

In this thesis I will investigate the relative health of the Dallas theatre scene by examining the factors that have negatively affected its existence. With the significance of a longterm theatre loss upon our cultural community only now being realized, an analysis of its predicament should reveal the sources of its plight and prospects for its future.

While many would characterize the City of Dallas as being dynamic and fast-growing for business opportunities, they would be surprised by its distinction of being located within a state that ranks fiftieth in per/state spending for the arts. Recent articles in the Dallas Morning News on arts funding note that Texas trails American Samoa in the amount of tax dollars spent per capita on the arts.³ Such a distinction carries little prestige for Texas or Dallas. If arts support is essential to a healthy cultural climate, then the forecast for Dallas does indeed look grim. The signs do not look promising in an uncertain future.

While most Dallas theatre-goers are acquainted with the local syndrome of the vanishing theatres, and recall various theatres they once attended, but which no longer exist, these audience members have little insight into the trends, economic conditions, funding issues, societal changes, and political manipulations that create the cultural climate that enhance or diminish theatre in their city. For others, the arts remain an abstraction with many patrons of an evening of free Shakespeare totally missing the connection between supporting the arts with their pocketbook, on a regular basis, as well as enjoying the gratuitous performances. That theatre in Dallas is endangered cannot be denied. Six major Equity theatres have shut down production in Dallas in the last six years: The New Arts Theatre (1987), Stage #1 (1988), The Plaza Theatre (1991), The Moving Target Theatre and Dallas Repertory Theatre (1991), and Theatre Three (1992). Theatre Three is presently trying to resurrect itself on a show-by-show basis, but the lack of operational funds and staff cut-backs have precluded it announcing a season.

A survey of the literature on Dallas theatre reveals a genuine deficiency of research in the problem area of this thesis. While several scholars have traced the contributions of Margo Jones, who is generally credited with founding regional theater in the Southwest, there has been little attention paid to the state of Dallas theatre following Jones's death in 1955. Though several studies in the early

1970s followed the twenty-three years of Paul Baker's leadership as artistic director of the Dallas Theater Center, no detailed study of the state of Dallas theatre for the last twenty years exists. If one believes that the true measure of a civilization can be found in the way a nation regards its arts, and that the theatre is an art that is indeed relevant, worthy, and integral to the quality of our lives, then its loss becomes our concern and its protection a responsibility of community citizenship. It is hoped that this study might make some contribution to an awareness of the causes of the Dallas theatre deficit and identify ways that it might be reversed in the future.

The methodology for this study involves a historical review of Dallas theatre activity during the last fifteen years (1978-1993) correlating the theatre scene with the influences that have shaped it. Economic indicators, theatre funding, audience support, Equity regulations, the loss of artistic leadership, and the effects of an ever-growing artistic deficit are explored.

Primary and secondary sources for this study include Dallas newspaper files cataloging the last thirty-one years, the U.S. Department of Labor; CPI Detailed Report on Texas Economic Indicators, personal interviews, the Theatre Communication Group Studies, several Texas periodicals, and selected books on the subject area. This study will be divided by chapters examining the following aspects of the

problem: Chapter Two will introduce the significance and history of the Dallas theatre scene as an emerging regional force on the national scene. Chapter Three will consider the trends and changing conditions that effected a tailspin in Dallas's economic boom to doom, resulting in the empty seats that plague Dallas productions. Chapter Four will correlate the changing conditions in Chapter Three along with the variety of other influences that share responsibility for the endangered state of theatre in Dallas. Chapter Five will examine the prospects for Dallas theatre, once a bright spotlight, but now a dim bulb on the porch of American regional theatre.

NOTES

- 1 Rosenfield, John, Dallas Morning News.
28 October 1962.
- 2 Neville, John, "1973 A Banner Theater Year."
Dallas Morning News, 4 January 1974.
- 3 Weeks, Jerome, "Is it curtains for theater in
Dallas? Or will the show go on?" Dallas Morning News,
10 May 1987.

CHAPTER II

By 1949 the reputation of Margo Jones's little theatre troupe, which she had moved into a former exhibition hall in the shadow of Dallas' famous Cotton Bowl, had captured the attention of the New York papers. Brooks Atkinson, theatre critic for The New York Times, wrote, "the fare Miss Jones serves...is no insipid imitation of Broadway, but original, nourishing and uncommonly well-balanced" 1. Launched in 1947, after being persuaded by the Dallas Morning News theatre critic, John Rosenfield, to begin a Dallas theatre, Jones's theatre was initially financed with \$10,000 collected through local fundraising and a major Rockefeller grant for the balance. Although a small network of Little Theatres had existed in most major cities, they were by definition amateur groups producing plays that had already won popularity on Broadway. Staging world premieres of Tennessee Williams's Summer and Smoke and William Inge's The Dark at the Top of the Stairs in her first season of 1947, Jones put Dallas on the map as a regional theatre center. Suddenly Margo Jones defined Dallas theatre culture and dozens of fledgling theatres throughout the Southwest looked to her little playhouse, Theatre '47, as their model. Dallas theatre critic, Jerome Weeks noted, "Socially, nationally,

artistically, Margo Jones's pioneering Theatre '47 was the peak of the city's cultural life" 2. As followers, who shared her ideas of a high-quality professional theatre independent of Broadway, fanned out across the country, Jones was described by one author as "The High Priestess" of the regional theatre movement. That same year, in 1947, Nina Vance, another of Jones's disciples and a visionary herself, opened Houston's Alley Theater with a subscription audience solicited by penny postcards. Before these two extraordinary women began their theatre activities, American theatre was Broadway and its extension, the road company. After Jones and Vance, the American regional theatre developed in nearly three hundred theatres across the country. Never again would theatre in the United States be confined to a ten block area of New York City.

Today, in retrospect, one might question whether the dream of Margo Jones, stated in the prologue from her original grant proposal, died with her in 1955. She wrote:

This is a plan for the creation of a permanent, professional, repertory, native theatre in Dallas, Texas, ...a theatre that will give the young playwrights of America a chance to be seen; a theatre that will provide the classics and the best new scripts with a chance for good production; a theatre that will enable Dallasites to say 20 years from now, 'My children have lived

in a town where they could see the best plays of the world presented in a beautiful and fine way.³ Jones's theatre managed to continue after her death, but in many respects it was a leaderless venture. The end of the little theatre in Fair Park came in 1958. Although many professed to carry her vision forward, it would not be without change and confusion. One wonders if Jones would recognize the Dallas theatre scene today, so greatly has it changed since 1947.

In 1959, a year after the closing of Jones's theatre, The Dallas Theatre Center, housed in the only theatre designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, opened in a park on Turtle Creek. This was followed a year later by the opening of Theatre Three. Both theatres are located in the Oak Lawn area of Dallas, where most of the city's theatrical activity has been centered. Both theatres have faced their share of obstacles, financial, artistic, and administrative.

The Dallas Theater Center was initially led by Paul Baker of Baylor University. Baker formed the Center's first acting company with graduate students from Baylor, and later, after political differences with Baylor, he continued with students from San Antonio's Trinity University. Although Baker reigned as the artistic director of The Dallas Theater Center for twenty-three years, he was accused of running The Theater Center as an educational institution instead of a professional theatre company. Critics identified Baker's

refusal to establish a contract with Actor's Equity as proof that Dallas had been denied real talent and as the reason Dallas still did not have a nationally ranked repertory company. Accused of being autocratic, Baker regularly fought off challenges to his control, but was finally dismissed by the Theater Center's Board of Directors in 1982. Ironically, Baker's replacement, Adrian Hall, the founding artistic director of the Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island, would later prove as irascible and autocratic as Baker.

Paul Baker's Dallas Theater Center was, however, by no means the only theatre company in town. Theatre Three holds the distinction of being Dallas' second-oldest and second-largest theatre company and was the second, after Margo Jones's Theatre, to operate with an Equity contract. Although established as a semi-professional company housed in the Sam Houston Ballroom of the Sheraton Dallas Hotel, Theatre Three had its own playhouse within its first nine months of operation. Its leadership has remained for thirty-three years in the hands of its executive producer-director, Jac Alder, and his wife and co-founder/artistic director, Norma Young. Although Theatre Three is fortunate enough to now own its own renovated building in the Quadrangle, after years of a leasing arrangement with the shopping center's owner, Theatre Three has battled financial problems year after year. Theatre Three is in good financial shape today,

compared to most non-profit theatres, but what it doesn't have, according to Jac Alder, is enough money to support its staff or mount a regular season.

While The Dallas Theater Center survives today and Theatre Three is holding on, many other companies have come and gone. An examination of their artistic life cycle and the significance of their departure should shed some light on why theatre critic Rual Askew questioned, as early as 1963, whether Dallas would ever become committed to its theatre. In that year he wrote, "Maybe for all the wishful talk, Dallas' often fadistic public never will devote the time and interest to make theatre-going a habit" 4. Twenty-four years later, John Tatum, board president of Stage Number One remarked, "The bad news is the audience response...that raises questions in my mind about the future of theater in this city. The audience hasn't matured to the point where the market will bear anything but theater that's simply entertainment. Can theater here hang on?" 5. Over the years, the continued development of theatre ventures in Dallas appears to say more for the optimism of its activists than the fate that so often awaits them. Still, whatever the ultimate fate of Dallas's theatres, there has never been a shortage of new companies in recent years.

In 1962, along with the founding of Theatre Three, a new group of actors, The Chappell Players, established the Pearl Chappell Playhouse. A shopping center, Big Town's Town Hall,

also entered the business of theatre with a professional production of Janus in 1962. And a flurry of fine arts was stirred in the suburbs as people with roots closer to Broadway, Carnegie Hall, and the Metropolitan Opera migrated into the Dallas area. The Richardson Players of Richardson, Theatre 34, so named for the Farmers Branch postal zone of its hometown, The Lancaster Little Theatre, The Beverly Hills Theatre, located in Oak Cliff, The Dallas Broadway League at the Memorial Theatre, the State Fair Music Hall, Arlington's Community Theatre, and such unlikely places as the Harry Stone Recreation Center in Casa View were active in producing theatre in the 1960's along with the previously established companies. Theatre critics noted that even the White Rock Kiwanis Club and their Kiwani-Annes were engaging professional directors, choreographers, and musical directors to produce their annual musicals.⁶ Such proliferation of the arts prompted John Rosenfield, Dallas Morning News theatre critic, to remark in 1962: "There is a large living stage in Dallas and more good basic theatre than any one Dallasite has time or means to patronize" ⁷. One week later, in October of 1962, Rosenfield's column bitterly noted that a million dollar grant had just gone to Houston's Alley Theatre and over six million to other resident theatres, but not a dime had come to Dallas. He wrote, "Dallas has been ignored, if not humiliated. The Southwestern City that was leading the way five years ago has been left to its own devices. Now

that the national subsidy is coming into millions, it is frustrating to find Dallas denied the joys of motherhood and not even credited with its midwifery" 8.

In 1971 the City of Dallas commissioned a feasibility study for a Dallas Performing Arts Center, but the study itself gave no indication of a presentation date to the City Council. Further, the study was assembled by an architect, Guillermo Vidaud, without regard to contributions of, or input from the city's theatre community.⁹

The light theatrical fare of dinner theatres reached their height of popularity in 1973 when the North Dallas area supported three active dinner theatres. The Windmill Dinner Theatre, the Country Dinner Theatre, and Granny's Dinner Playhouse all capitalized on the trendy small-scale musicals and Neil Simon comedies. Dallas Repertory Theatre opened in 1969, conveniently operating out of the popular NorthPark Shopping Center, in the free community hall. Dallas Repertory Theatre competed for the same North Dallas audience as the dinner theatres, presenting its own version of family-oriented entertainment with pocket musicals, often dictated by space, heavy doses of Rodgers and Hammerstein, cutting-edge Andrew Lloyd Weber and Stephen Sondheim, and the light romantic comedies of Neil Simon and other contemporaries. In later years, the Dallas Rep took on more demanding theatrical material, such as August Wilson's Fences. When the dinner theatres began passing on higher and higher ticket prices,

they first attempted to contain costs by booking more revues and touring musical acts. But even the two extra intermissions, ostensibly to sell more drinks, could not prevent the demise of the dinner theatres and they fell one by one in the early 1980's.

The Richland on Abrams Professional Theatre Company, operating on the campus of Richland Community College, had its debut in 1973. Theatre SMU achieved national recognition for maintaining high standards. John Neville, of the Dallas Morning News, considered 1973 a banner year for Dallas theatre and stated, "There has probably never been so much theatre action in Dallas before" 10.

In 1975 another study of the arts needs for facilities and performing arts centers was conducted for the City of Dallas. The study was presented to the Parks and Recreation Board as Dallas lacked any cultural arts board or office.¹¹

The growing theatrical activity in Dallas began to exert pressure on Paul Baker's Dallas Theater Center. Facing internal problems within his student acting company and attempting to counter the Dallas Theater Center's image as a temple of the arts set in a wooded grove, Baker stated, "We have to get out of our ivory towers. . .The message we're getting is that theatre has to be part of the whole community" 12. To this end, the Dallas Minority Repertory Theatre was founded in 1976 as an off-shoot of the Theater Center. Later, in 1980, the Dallas Minority Repertory

Theatre was given a performance space by Bishop College.

Jack Clay, an instructor and director of Southern Methodist University's theatre department, formed Stage #1 in 1979. This company was established to provide professional experience for SMU graduate students and to present new or very recent American plays. Stage #1 opened in November 1979 with Lanford Wilson's Fifth of July in Olla Podrida's Haymarket Theater, located in North Dallas. In its initial season, Stage #1 collected excellent reviews and little money, a not uncommon situation of the Dallas theatre scene. For its next season, Clay moved Stage #1 to a former garage on Lower Greenville Avenue, an address now occupied by the Greenville Avenue Pocket Sandwich Theatre. The Dallas premiere of David Mamet's, American Buffalo, opened the second season, and it was followed by new plays by David Rabe, Sam Shepard, Marsha Norman, Elizabeth Swados, John Olive, Horton Foote, and Larry Shue. Although Stage #1 was a critical success which "not only consistently offered the best acting and directing in town," its risky production choices were a thorn in the side of conservative Southern Methodist University.¹³ As an SMU faculty member, with an office in the Meadows School of the Arts building, Clay found himself beholden to the Meadows Foundation, Dallas' most generous supporter of the arts. Dr. Sally Lancaster, vice president and grants administrator for the Meadows Foundation, was not amused by Stage #1's artistic choices.

"Their shows were not harmonious with our directors' more conservative philosophy. We tend to support more mainline family-oriented theater and don't want it pushed aside by the avant-garde. Stage #1 did do some good things but too many shows had objectionable language" 14.

Artistically successful, but a funding pariah, Stage #1 faced financial disaster with a \$40,000 - \$50,000 deficit each year. Clay's own fundraising among wealthy personal friends regularly made up the difference. With little support from SMU, and forced to choose between Stage #1 and his teaching, Jack Clay left SMU in 1985 to become head of the professional acting program at the University of Washington in Seattle. Clay later acknowledged that the loss of support from the Meadows Foundation influenced his decision to leave Dallas. "They say they aren't censors but, ...they are by making artistic judgements. They are the principal providers of arts money in Dallas and their taste will prevail" 15.

The 1980's began with new homes for several neophyte companies. In addition to Stage #1 making its move from the Haymarket Theatre to 2914 Greenville Avenue, Theatre Onstage left its home in the Trinity Methodist Church in search of a new facility, and two minority theatres, the bilingual Red Wind relocated to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, and the Dallas Minority Repertory Theatre made its move to Bishop College. The previously nomadic New Arts Theatre settled

into a new home in the historic West End of downtown Dallas. Extended runs, a practice whereby a theatre that found a hit might run it for considerable profit, to help offset less popular shows, were the order of the day for theatre companies. Though Theatre Three originally thought they were taking a chance with Ntozake Shange's, for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow isn't enuf, the show proved to be a sell-out and ran for seven weeks. The New Arts theatre, committed to new work, extended a one week run of Lone Star, for a total of three months.

Although a period of growth and renewal, 1982 was punctuated with reversals and redirections. Most significantly, Paul Baker, a near legend and synonymous with Dallas theatre, was abruptly dismissed from the Dallas Theater Center. Adrian Hall, of the Trinity Repertory Company of Providence, Rhode Island, was dispatched to the scene. Hall, whose reputation had preceded him to Dallas, was determined to make his mark on the city. He held on to his position with Trinity Rep while setting about to realign the Theater Center's conservative constituency. Hall insisted that a second theater with a cost of \$1.6 million, be built downtown to "penetrate those audiences we've never reached,"¹⁶ and he demanded full authority to form his own acting company. He also promised to update, though others might argue that shakeup was the more apt word, the provincial dramatic program he inherited. Hall's first

season staging of Sam Shepherd's Fool For Love shocked his champagne sipping subscribers. Offended season ticket-holders, 4,000 by the end of his fourth season, voted with their feet not to renew their subscriptions. Other detractors criticized the controversial plays, cost overruns and the design of the new downtown Arts District Theatre, a building that looked more like a huge steel prefabricated warehouse than a monument to the arts. Staff dismissals (Hall had gone through twelve general managers at Trinity since 1964) and accusations that he was importing his talent and productions from the Trinity Rep, with no principal performers taken from the Dallas talent pool, brought additional criticism. Hall claimed he received hateful letters accusing him of being a "bandit" for offering Dallas, in effect, second-hand goods.¹⁷ The subscriber list under Hall dropped to two-thirds the number of subscribers under Baker in the early Eighties.

Peter Donnelly, of the Seattle Repertory Theatre was brought to the Dallas Theatre Center for a subscription resuscitation. Donnelly had been credited with building the Seattle Rep into one of the healthiest and most respected theatres in the country. Under Donnelly's leadership, subscribers had risen from 11,500 to 25,000, a new ten million dollar, mortgage-free theatre had been built, and 200,000 theater-goers were attending Seattle Rep annually. As the executive managing director of The Dallas Theater

Center, Donnelly was able to reverse the subscription decline in less than a year and add a thousand new subscribers. More than half of the \$833,000 dollar debt reached during Hall's third year was reduced in four years. Unfortunately, the list of Theater Center subscribers, approximately 9,000 today, is still low when contrasted with comparable cities such as Seattle, San Diego, Minneapolis, Atlanta, or Milwaukee.

A theatre landmark to vanish in 1982 was the 54 year-old Festival Theatre on Maple Avenue, one of the last links with Dallas theatrical activity in the 1930's and 40's. The Festival Theatre was struck down by a developer's wrecking ball, but some comfort could be found in the fact that two other stage landmarks, both former movie houses, were saved. The Oak Lawn Esquire Theatre was reopened by a new troupe, City Center Ltd., and The Plaza Theatre, built in 1928, was leased by Kjehl Rasmussen's company MCH Theatres (Manhattan Clearing House). As the renovation costs doubled and delays followed, Polly Lou Moore, oil and gas heiress and greatest of the Dallas arts angels, came to MCH's rescue. At a cost of \$3 million, the 500 seat Plaza reopened in 1983. Under the leadership of Rasmussen and Moore, The Plaza, a slick art deco style theatre quickly gained a following for its popular and commercially chosen plays. By the end of its first year, The Plaza enjoyed a healthy box office and a subscription base of 5,000. With no intention of forming a resident

acting company, The Plaza was often criticized for its use of imported talent, not unlike the Dallas Theater Center, and for its dependence on national tours to fill out its season.

The renovations of The Plaza, and the Oak Lawn Esquire Theatre in 1982, represented a surge of entrepreneurial theatre activity in Dallas. These theatres and another company, ArtsVentures, marked the coming of the first commercial companies, since Granny's Dinner Playhouse. Michael Greenblatt, an investor along with Polly Lou Moore in the Esquire Theatre noted, "The North Dallas market is bullish right now" 18. The repertoires of these new companies, planned with an eye on the bottom line, never aspired to the same artistic mission as Stage #1, Theatre Three, or the New Arts Theatre. By emphasizing musicals, comedies, and name stars, they hoped to bring a lighter, but well-crafted, product to Dallas audiences. Their ventures added a new tier of commercially-oriented theatre atop the base of non-profit theatres. Although the productions of these companies would undoubtedly raise the profile of Dallas theatre, for better or worse, they acknowledged that they were hoping to attract the people who usually didn't attend theatre. Dan Hulbert, theatre critic for the Dallas Times Herald, noted, "...in the process they may be putting an even tighter financial squeeze on those artistically ambitious groups who are already finding it hard to compete for Dallas's entertainment dollar" 19. Not surprisingly, as

Kjahl Rasmussen laid the plans for The Plazas's first season, he too found his company fighting the same fiscal problem filling the seats of his five hundred seat theatre as his non-profit colleagues. When Rasmussen announced that Dale Rose, SMU theatre faculty member and gifted director, was to be the artistic director for The Plaza, there had been speculation about performing classics and new plays geared for a sophisticated SMU community. Yet those plans were apparently shelved as The Plaza's 1982-83 season veered sharply toward the lighter fare. According to Rasmussen, "We had to do some rethinking...with the downturn that so many arts organizations are taking at the box office, we had to ask ourselves seriously if we could get 500 people in here for Shakespeare" 20. Perhaps Rasmussen was following the same strategy as the former New York producer Joseph Papp, who often explained that his experimental works, at The Public Theatre and the free Shakespeare in Central Park, were bank-rolled by his long running A Chorus Line. Rasmussen remarked, "It seems to me that's the only way for serious producers to go in the future...by doing a variety of theatre, in a variety of space with one space supporting another" 21.

If Trammell Crow had kept a pledge made in August of 1981, Dallas in 1983 would have seen a new 2,000 seat theatre managed by the New York-based Shubert Organization. Crow's ambitious plans promised a theatre intended to feature recent

hit musicals and serve as a pre-Broadway try-out facility for New York directors. "We've made the deal, and we've agreed to build the theatre," Crow said, "I'd say we'll have it open in 18 months" 22. But to date there is no Shubert Theatre in Dallas. Although the Shubert Organization remains interested in Dallas, their representatives, Bernard Jacobs and Gerald Schoenfield, were unwilling to be tied to a timetable and stated that Dallas was fifteen to twenty years behind matching the theatrical activities of Los Angeles. The Shubert Organization operates theatres in San Francisco and Los Angeles, with most of the shows in these cities playing extended runs. Jacobs, a partner of the Shubert Organization, explained that for a city to get the national touring company of a major show, it must be able to support a run of several weeks. Jacobs stated, "You need to be able to run at least six or seven weeks for the first class touring production of a big musical, ...it's simple economics. The yearning for the arts in Dallas has to be more popular, it has to reach beyond the elite who've been supporting them in the past" 23. Convinced that Dallas lacked a large enough audience to support a Shubert theatre, Jacobs and Schoenfield predicted that a Shubert theater in Dallas was still some time off.

The 1983 openings of The Plaza Theatre in University Park, and the Majestic Theatre downtown, propelled Dallas into a larger arena of competing commercial companies, with

five local companies in rivalry for the rights to produce the same recent plays. Adrian Hall, as a director of national prestige and with the resources of the Dallas Theater Center at his disposal, stood to be the front runner in any competition for the rights to new material. Yet even he found himself in a fight to survive in a tight and competitive marketplace. With the bullish growth of new theatres in the city, the biggest unknown was the size of the Dallas audience and how many companies their numbers would support. The competition among the Dallas theatres, with many of the smaller companies forced to operate in the shadows of the commercial companies, caused several of the smaller companies to reexamine and redefine their artistic goals.

Christopher Nichols, New Arts director and founder, abandoned a previous commitment to new work, opting instead for popular standards geared to a mainstream audience. Stage #1 extended its search for new American works to lesser-known plays, since it seemed assured that the Dallas Theatre Center or The Plaza would get the production rights for better-known new plays. The Dallas Repertory Theatre and Theatre Three both continued to pursue their traditional audience, showcasing what they did best, but somewhat oblivious to the effects of the competition at hand, now producing similar fare.

By 1984 the effects of Dallas's increased profile on the

national theatre scene and competition among the local companies, brought distinction to some and disaster to others. Most theatre critics viewed Adrian Hall's new leadership of the Dallas Theater Center, as having the most significant impact on the theatre scene. Critics from both the Dallas Times Herald and the Dallas Morning News agreed that Hall was responsible for putting Dallas on the national theatre scene.²⁴ Hall and his acclaimed designer, Eugene Lee, were assuredly responsible for mobilizing the Dallas Theater Center's board members and staff to build the new downtown \$1.4 million Arts District Theatre, to renovate the Frank Lloyd Wright Theater, and create the 'In the Basement' space (formerly Down Center Stage).²⁵ Altogether the board approved seven million dollars for the new building and associated improvements.

Riding the wave of new growth and development, the Dallas Repertory Theatre was another company that expanded its arena in 1984. Moving from its modest corner in the NorthPark Shopping Center to the larger shell of a former NorthPark restaurant, its season contained more ambitious productions - The Pirates of Penzance, Romeo and Juliet, and Ain't Misbehavin,- and placed itself in competition for the same audiences as the larger Plaza and Majestic theatres.

The Plaza and Majestic, with strong first year subscription bases of five and seven thousand respectively, caught the eyes of several New York producers and Dallas was

thrust into a national network of tryout towns for prospective Broadway-bound productions, PACE Theatrical Group, based in Houston and claiming to be the third largest theatrical producer in the nation, became the Majestic's link to Broadway producers, Zev Bufman and Emmanuel Azenberg. According to Bufman, "Dallas is ideal as a tryout town because it's sophisticated without being jaded, ...there's a tingling excitement surrounding each new production, and it rubs off. The show is still an event" ²⁶. Other factors that made the Majestic attractive were its size, 1,600 seats provided the intimacy for straight plays and yet the needed size for musicals, and that the Majestic was built like a vintage Broadway house, which would allow set designs to transfer easily from one theatre to another. When the Majestic began its second season, PACE moved in and took over the booking decisions for the Majestic. Although a tryout city brings celebrities and a certain amount of glamour to the host theatre, critics have noted that Broadway tryouts and tours don't really contribute anything to Dallas's resident theatres except glitter.²⁷ Thus a booking theater, such as the Majestic, basically provides the building for the show and bodies to fill the seats.

The Plaza Theatre also aspired to be a home for Broadway tryouts, but the Plaza, unlike the Majestic, made its own artistic contribution, generating its own productions of The Palace of Amateurs, Down an Alley Filled with Cats, and

Crimes of the Heart. These shows toured after their Plaza run, though none moved to Broadway. The Plaza's apparent public success, in one year, was in stark contrast to the disarray of its financial underpinnings. Renovation loans still unpaid, and the efforts of several board members whose goals seemed at cross-purposes with Rasmussen and artistic director Dale Rose, left the Plaza on shaky financial ground. Facing a bleak economic future and unproductive fundraising, The Plaza board explored the possibility of selling, and then just turning over the theater to SMU for all but the summer months and winter holidays. Rose's group would then produce a summer season and a Christmas show. Andrew Curry of C.W. Shaver, a consulting firm hired to analyze the theatre's options, stated, "...the kind of season currently being offered isn't necessary. It's like having pro football twelve months a year. You grow weary of it" 28. By December of 1984, Kjehl Rasmussen and Dale Rose had been fired and the Plaza went dark for three months.²⁹ Currently being used as a booking house for touring productions, the Plaza has no artistic director or staff, except in the box office.

Stage #1 was another company facing a financial crisis by the fall of 1984. At the second play of the sixth season, the managing director, Ernest Fulton, stood before the curtain and informed an opening night audience that unless the company raised \$25,000 by the end of November, and \$80,000 by the first of the year, Stage #1 would be forced to

close. Jac Alder of Theatre Three had faced a similar situation the previous year, when Theatre Three faced bankruptcy and a likely shutdown. Both companies shared the frustration of having boards of directors unable to raise needed funds to cover costs for productions and facilities.³⁰ Such financial problems were a national as well as local issue. According to David Diamond of the Theatre Communications Group, a national coalition of non-profit theatres, regional theatres receive, on average, one-third of their income from contributions, as opposed to box office sales.³¹ Most of the financially-strapped Dallas theatres, large and small, found themselves competing for the same corporate sponsors. Incredibly, corporate sponsors are more willing to build new theatre buildings than to support artistic growth. Angus Wynne III, former board president for Stage #1, noted, "...it becomes a matter of bricks and mortar versus finding someone with means who's willing to be provoked intellectually" ³². Board members acquainted with fund raising problems have identified a common attitude toward the arts in Dallas: that, it is often easier to put up a building than to finance the artistic operation inside it. This attitude is particularly prevalent when the artistic choices of a theatre are questionable or risky.

Given the controversial productions of the Theater Center's director, Adrian Hall, and facing huge capital expenditures for new buildings, Marshall Doke, Jr., former

Dallas Theatre Center board president, acknowledged the fund raising dilemma; "We've antagonized a lot of people, for a number of different reasons. And obviously, when you've got to raise money, you've got to sell your product" 33. Thus the degree of artistic involvement by a board of directors, whose traditional role is finance, is an area of concern to all theatres. The Dallas Theater Center board leadership was strongly committed to the belief that it was not their prerogative to dictate artistic productions or directions. Doke stated, "You hire the person you believe is capable and you let him run. If it ever gets to the point that you can't support that person, you fire him and get somebody else" 34. Adrian Hall's six year tenure as artistic director of the Dallas Theater Center came to an end July 31, 1989, when the board decided not to renew his contract.³⁵

The New Arts Theatre was another victim of increased competition as it attempted to carve its niche, redefine itself, and solidify its support. Within one year, from 1984-85, the New Arts Theatre replaced its founder/artistic director Chris Nichols with director, Christopher Owens, who was then again, replaced by British-born Stephen Hollis. Although the quality of the New Arts productions was unpredictable, the theatre enjoyed a brief period of financial stability and a modest subscription base of 2,000.

In 1984 a new unofficial arts district, known as Deep Ellum, came into existence. Near the Fair Park building

where Margo Jones's Theatre '47 had once operated, a number of semiprofessional troupes began to appear in the distinctively urban, alternative theatre scene of Deep Ellum. Empty warehouse space, former bars and comedy clubs, and, in the case of the Undermain, a snug catacomb originally designed as a fall-out shelter, provided the performance areas in this former industrial wasteland. Katherine Owens was the first to use the bomb shelter in the basement of a warehouse at 3200 Main. Along with her associate, Raphael Parry, she started the Undermain Theatre as a workshop theatre. The workshop's ensemble of eight to ten staged such seldom-performed work as Sam Shepard's, Killer's Head, Dario Fo's Can't Play?, Samuel Beckett's, Imagination Dead Imagine and Caryl Churchill's, Fen. Although the group began with only \$30 for the first show, the growing reputation of the Undermain, has built a considerable following and it is today considered one of the most exciting theatre companies in North Texas ³⁶. Grant support was provided by the McLean-Paris Foundation and National Endowment for the Arts and today, the annual budget far exceeds \$80,000.

The Pegasus Theatre, with one hundred seats, the largest of the Deep Ellum theatres opened in 1985. Originally known as the Main Stage Theatre, the name was changed to Pegasus by its artistic director, Kurt Kleinmann. Emphasizing ensemble work and leaning toward campy satires and film spoofs, Pegasus has been called the court jester of Deep Ellum.³⁷

Although Pegasus has attempted classic scripts, such as Tartuffe, and Mrs. Warren's Profession, these productions were not well-received by critics or the theatre's regular audience. Despite financial uncertainties and capricious production values, the Deep Ellum theatres, have become the nursery for seedlings for the Dallas theatre community.

With the 1985 departure in 1985 of Jack Clay, founder and artistic director of Stage #1, that theatre was crippled by financial woes and uneven productions. Facing a near hundred percent increase in the rent for their Greenville Avenue theatre, Stage #1 was forced to move. Board member Janelle Ellis established a link with Crescent Hotel owner, Caroline Hunt, and Stage #1 moved into the Crescent Marketing Center building for a token dollar-a-year rent. Loans were made on overdue bills and a gift from a generous patron paid half their budget for 1985. Yet by 1986 the finance state of Stage #1 was again out of balance. Artistic leadership for Stage #1 passed from Jack Clay to Patrick Kelly, a director/instructor at the Universtiy of Dallas, but even a critically acclaimed season of contemporary American plays could not fill the theatre. Kelly mounted only the newest works. His 1987 staging of Planet Fires was so stunning that it won a Dallas Critics Forum Award as one of the four best productions of the season ³⁸. This elaborate production, in spite of the award publicity and a weekly staging cost of \$5,000, played to small audiences and was forced to close a

week early. Kelly's comments that year reflected his frustration at the theatre's lack of support: "Suddenly it's not a matter of selecting the plays I like and think are important, but the ones people will want to see. I want to continue to lead, to take risks, but..." 39. Planet Fires proved to be Stage #1's last artistic flame. By the end of 1987, Patrick Kelly had resigned as artistic director and the company has not staged anything since.

When dropping oil prices in 1986 took public arts support down with them, Dallas theatre companies looked to their box office returns to take up the slack. The low rate of season ticket subscribers, the best barometer of community support, is a common plight for Dallas theatres, especially so, when contrasted with subscriber support in comparable cities. The Dallas Repertory Theatre and Stage #1 both had less than 1,000 subscribers in 1986, and the Dallas Theater Center had only half of the 13,000 it had enjoyed in the late 1970's. In contrast, San Diego's Old Globe Theatre had 50,000 subscribers in 1986, and Minneapolis's Guthrie and Seattle Rep each, had more than 23,000 subscribers.⁴⁰ The lack of subscriber support for Dallas theatres makes single-ticket support all the more critical.

Audience response to Theatre Three and New Arts productions reflected the fickle nature of the Dallas audiences. While musical hits A...My Name Is Alice, and Little Shop of Horrors sold ninety-six percent and a hundred

and one percent of capacity at Theatre Three, and The Rocky Horror Show was the biggest seller in New Arts' history, the other twelve productions of these two theatres sold no more than seventy percent. Though the aforementioned shows were also the best critically-received, there seemed to be no assured correlation. For example, Legends! at the Majestic, with name stars Mary Martin and Carol Channing, received much advance publicity and poor reviews and yet sold ninety percent of its house. Butler County at Stage #1 had unknown actors, slight publicity, and good reviews, yet it sold only fifty-four percent, of house capacity.⁴¹ In 1986, the Dallas Repertory Theatre, under the artistic leadership of Ed De Latte, was considered the box office champion among the non-profit resident theatres. The Rep had always enjoyed the highest earned income at the box office and its business manager, Don Cowan, had boasted that only one show sold less than eighty percent. Once the icon of family entertainment, the Dallas Rep expanded their repertoire to include Evita, Baby, and Greater Tuna. Yet, 1987 brought the first deficit of the Rep's eighteen-year history; some of the productions of the 1986-87 season had earned only sixty-five percent of their costs and the Dallas Repertory was left with a debt of \$85,000.

Two new Deep Ellum theatres made their debut in 1986, but their artistic lives would be brief. Scott Matthews, a young Dallas playwright/director, turned the old 500 Cafe

into the Exposition Street Theatre, which featured an indoor-outdoor performing space. There, he premiered his own Nevada Coyote Highway and also managed the box office. Just one year later the Exposition Street Theatre folded and Scott Matthews left Dallas for graduate school in Rhode Island. Before leaving the Dallas theatre scene, Scott Matthews revealed that most of the Deep Ellum theaters are generally kept solvent by the artistic directors' parents. Thus, without the families of Kurt Kleinmann of Pegasus Theatre, and Katherine Owens and Randy Perry of the Undermain, there probably wouldn't be a Pegasus, or an Undermain. The Deep Ellum Theatre Garage was founded by Matthew Posey, a popular Dallas actor. Described as risk-taking, scruffy, and occasionally inspired, the Theatre Garage offered everything from Brecht to off-off Broadway.⁴² The Theatre Garage closed when artistic director/actor Posey moved to Los Angeles. As a postscript, a new Deep Ellum theatre, the Hickory Street Annex Theatre assumed the space of the Theatre Garage in 1991.

Perhaps the despair that was to hit the Dallas theatre scene in 1987 should have been apparent as early as February of that year, when the New Arts Theatre closed its doors. The New Arts closing was disturbing, because it revealed how precarious the financial base was for all Dallas theatre companies. After all, most Equity theatres had similar, or even greater deficits. Ironically, only a year earlier, in

1986, Jerome Weeks, theatre critic for the Dallas Morning News, had featured a story about the Dallas Theatre Center encouraging fifty New York area actors to fly to Dallas, at their own expense, to audition for Adrian Hall, the New Arts Theatre, the Dallas Shakespeare Festival, and local talent agencies and casting directors.⁴³ Adrian Hall's assistant explained that it was an attempt to increase the amount of high quality acting talent available and though there were no real positions or contracts being offered, thirty-five New York actors made the trip to examine the Dallas theatre scene firsthand.

The impending deficits of many local theatres and the folding of the New Arts Theatre were grave omens for many companies in 1987. Jerome Weeks had warned in May of that year, that, "at present there is not a single Dallas theater in good financial shape" ⁴⁴. Although Theatre Three had generally been considered one of the more fiscally sound institutions, balancing daily operational costs with costs of a major expansion and refurbishments had created a serious cash-flow problem for this theatre. Growing interest charges had pushed Theatre Three's building debt to a half a million dollars. Jac Alder, executive producer for Theatre Three, attributed this debt problem to the local economic conditions, which was making fund raising difficult. The Dallas Repertory's Ed De Latte concurred with this analysis regarding fund raising. "We've had so little response from

corporations and foundations," noted De Latte, "that we've had to rely...on an all-out campaign directed toward individuals" 45. The economic difficulties shared by the Dallas Repertory and Theatre Three continued despite their successful seasons, for the subscriptions sales were down at both theatres. De Latte explained that, "...ticket sales really pay for nothing beyond actors' salaries, royalties and the orchestra. Fund raising must pay for everything else" 46. Dallas Repertory Theatre considered reducing the number of week nights a show is run to lower costs for their next season. By the end of the summer, both Theatre Three and the Pegasus Theatre were engaged in seat-selling campaigns as a means of raising money to pay off debts. For a donation, either theatre would 'sell' you a seat. Though the Pegasus had sold fifty percent of their seats at \$50 each, Theatre Three had less success with their seat sale, selling only three seats at \$2,000 each.

Even the Dallas Shakespeare Festival could not escape the financial fallout of 1987, although their response was a testimony to their resiliency. When the Internal Revenue Service discovered a huge debt of unpaid payroll taxes, the Festival nearly eliminated its staff and rallied to raise the money to pay the IRS. The founder of the Shakespeare Festival, Bob Glenn, resigned during the crisis, but the show went on with new director Dale Rose. Another theatre resignation of significance was that of Andrew Harris, the

new and innovative theatre chairman at Southern Methodist University. When, as a result of the SMU football scandal, the administration requested the arts departments to return part of their budgets, Harris was not amused. The results included cutbacks for SMU's first New Play Festival and tension between Harris and the faculty ensued. According to Eugene Bonelli, dean of the Meadows School of the Arts, Harris was asked to step down because of the faculty's "level of tension" 47.

Sinking oil prices created an economic riptide that affected the arts/education/government nexus at the state level. Resultant state cutbacks of monies directed to the University of Texas at Dallas forced staff reductions in the School of Arts and Humanities.⁴⁸ Thus a small but developing performance program was significantly pruned back in its early stages.

Although the oil slump of 1987 nearly darkened theatres across the board, a few accomplishments broke new ground and deserve mention. One achievement of the year was the realization of a promise made to Adrian Hall when he accepted leadership of the Theater Center. Hall was permitted to select, for the first time in Dallas Theater Center history, a salaried company of fifteen actors, who were guaranteed roles in at least three shows a year, at the rate of \$450 a week, \$70 more than the base Equity minimum of \$380 for a regional theatre the size of the Theater Center. Another

development was the appearance of a few minority and independent theatre companies; the Minority Actors Guild, Moving Target Theatre Company, August Repertory, Liminal Productions, Red Hollywood and the Dream Team. One reason for the almost rapid fire appearance of the new independent companies was the widespread belief that Dallas theatre was becoming a closed shop, particularly in light of Hall's resident company, and the fact that other established theatres experiencing financial troubles were programming tighter seasons and smaller casts. Thus many theatre people felt excluded. The new companies provided an underground economy that percolated around the fringes of the more established theatres. Whether they would succeed was a question that only time, competition, brains, talent and perseverance could answer.

After three years of existence, three Deep Ellum theatres took steps in 1988 to develop elements of traditional companies. The Deep Ellum Theatre Garage and the Undermain Theatre took steps to develop boards of directors while the Pegasus Theatre planned to market a subscription season. Recognizing that a board of directors, by its very nature, gives a theatre a connection to the local community and business network, most independent companies see development of a board as a means to assist with financial affairs. Small non-traditional companies usually start with a couple of actors and directors working on projects, then

incorporate themselves to attain non-profit status, and, once established as a non-profit institution, seek to secure grants to supplement their existence. The drawback for establishing a board of directors is frequently perceived as loss of control to the board and then a loss of artistic identity. Katherine Owens, co-artistic director of the Undermain, noted, "...typically, non-profit boards in Dallas haven't been good for little theatres like ours" 49.

Regardless of possible negatives, an organized corporate structure has become the basic proof of professionalism to the fiscal supporters in the public and private sectors of society. Following the establishment of the board of directors for the Undermain, the theatre received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the 500 Inc. Since the Pegasus Theatre already had a board, artistic director Kurt Kleinmann attempted to enhance the permanence of his theatre by offering a subscription series. To emphasize the affordability of theatre, Kleinmann offered a three-show or six-show package, and he also established various ticket discount partnerships with area restaurants. The Moving Target Theatre, even without a permanent space, also offered its first subscription series in 1988.

In 1988 evidence was building that professional theatre was moving out of Dallas. The loss of the New Arts Theatre and Stage #1 in 1987 had dropped the number of Dallas's Equity houses from six to four. Since the Dallas Shakespeare

Festival was only a summer producer, that left Dallas with three Equity houses with regular seasons. The Dallas Theatre Center, now with its own acting company, further reduced employment opportunities for Equity actors. During a regular season, Dallas Equity actors were now limited to Theatre Three and the Dallas Repertory Theatre, both, due to economics, producing smaller cast shows. Near the conclusion of 1988, critic Jerome Weeks noted the actors, directors, designers, plays and playwrights leaving the area and reflected, " , , , the theater is sifting through our fingers" 50.

Although the comments of Jerome Weeks had been written the previous year, they became prophetic with the 1989 departure of the Dallas Theater Center's artistic director, Adrian Hall. Hall's combative management style, unmatched budget deficits, and his divided attention between the Theater Center in Dallas and the Trinity Rep in Providence, Rhode Island, were all considered factors for the board of directors' decision not to renew his contract.⁵¹ With Hall's departure in July, just two years after the establishment of the Theater Center's resident acting company, Ken Bryant was appointed as the interim artistic director of the Theater Center, with Jeff West replacing Peter Donnelly, former executive managing director, who had resigned, opting to return to the Seattle Rep.

Comparatively speaking, Dallas had much more theatre

activity in 1989 than anywhere else in the Southwest region, and more than many large cities across the country. But when compared with such fine theatre cities as Chicago, Seattle, and Minneapolis, Dallas makes a poor showing. Without the stages, performers, directors, writers, festivals, and most of all, the theatre support from loyal audiences, Dallas was not a part of the exchange of scripts and people who tied together the major regional theatre in the United States.⁵² While Dallas's theatre profile had no less than twelve theatres, each with a tenure of four or more years, and a proliferation of new troupes which multiplied faster than audiences could pin down their location, much less their identity, what Dallas had not had was a consistent audience commitment. This was evident in the fact that not a single Dallas theatre could regularly draw a full, paying house on opening night, regardless of what was staged.⁵³

This lack of audience support exemplifies a basic problem for local theatres; that of developing a loyal audience. Dallas theatres have shown that they can get an audience, on a one-time basis for nearly any dramatic form, but have, however, a difficult time getting the audience to return for other shows. As Jac Alder, Theatre Three's executive producer, once commented regarding selling season subscriptions: "The real goal of a season is not to get people in for what they're already interested in. The real goal is to get them to stick around" ⁵⁴. One theatre that

appears to be immune to this problem is the Dallas Summer Musicals. Tom Hughes, the Summer Musicals' managing director, has regularly delivered a commercial (touring) Broadway season to Dallas, for forty years. According to Hughes, "...bad economy or not, Dallasites still show up at the Music Hall. We're brand-name loyalists" 55. While 15,000 Summer Musical season ticket-holders approximate the size of a regional theatre audience in a Dallas-size market, such support does not help local theatres, who find themselves competing with one of the last remaining successful commercial road show organizations. Dallasites believe they are supporting local theatre with their subscriptions to the Summer Musical season: they are mistaken. The commitment of 15,000 Dallas Summer Musical subscribers means Dallas theatres are left with fewer subscribers in their market and a higher percentage of single-ticket buyers than the national average.⁵⁶ Since single ticket buyers are not as loyal, and often hold back on ticket purchases awaiting favorable reviews or comments, they contribute to the hit-or-miss economics of local productions. The inequity is that a touring company of a Broadway show represents a business gamble that has already been won. America's regional or resident theatres, were formed to create productions here, not import them from New York. Dallas needs to support local artists, for community support has become a financial necessity.

It should not be a surprise that the 1989 opening of the Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center coincided with the creation of a newly-established Office of Cultural Affairs for the City of Dallas. Since 1976 the City Arts Program (later called the Division of Cultural Affairs) had operated as a division of the Dallas Park and Recreation Department. When the architecturally acclaimed Meyerson Symphony Center became the second major arts facility in the Downtown Arts District, following the opening of the Dallas Museum of Art in 1984, overseeing City-owned arts facilities became a major responsibility of the new Office of Cultural Affairs. An eighteen-member Cultural Affairs Commission, appointed by the City Council, now serves as the advisory body to the Office of Cultural Affairs. In addition to overseeing City-owned facilities, the committee also attempts to coordinate existing cultural programs, develop new cultural activities, and promote public awareness of the City's role in the arts. The Commission, which meets monthly, is responsible for, among other tasks, making recommendations regarding the expenditure of City funds on cultural programs, facilities, and organizations. Performing arts spaces that are city-owned and managed, in addition to the Meyerson, include the Bath House Cultural Center, located on White Rock Lake, and the South Dallas Cultural Center, located south of Fair Park. The Dallas Theater Center, Fair Park Music Hall, and the Majestic Theatre are also city-owned although managed by non-

profit organizations.

Although the Dallas theatre scene achieved a degree of stability in 1989, the following year again brought chaotic conditions. A Dallas real estate boom would strike its blows and take its toll on both the seemingly established and newly emerging companies. The Plaza Theatre, to outward appearances successful, was never able to overcome its debt-laden state. Expensive touring cast shows, though award-winning and popular with patrons, prevented the Plaza from establishing profitability and getting a hold on a budget far out of control. Unable to pay its \$10,000 monthly rent, the Plaza Theatre closed and abandoned its space in July, 1990.

In 1990, a scramble for performing and rehearsal space became the biggest priority of a new wave of young theatre companies. Skyrocketing property values in Deep Ellum forced new troupes, just beginning to establish their identities, to play musical chairs with available real-estate and to use many non-theatrical sites, such as churches, bookstores, and pawn shops. Even the Undermain was forced by city building codes to abandon their basement, during which time they moved upstairs while repairs were made below. The new companies were forced into an ongoing migration from one space to another around town, their audience attempting to follow. While this proliferation of new companies suggested an increased theatre consciousness, a Darwinian struggle would insue as the poorly organized and less determined would

be winnowed from the fold. Although their actual date of establishment varied, the following companies first surfaced in 1990-91: Acme Diversified, the Actors' Stock Company, the Actors' Theatre of Dallas, the Afro-American Players, Athea Performance Group, the Classic Theatre Company, Dallas Alliance Theatre, the Dallas Drama Company, Front and Center Theatre, the Gryphon Players, Hard City Theatre, the Junior Black Academy, Kitchen Dog Theatre, the Moonstruck Theatre Company, the Open Stage, Rising Moon Theatre, Studio East, Teatro Dallas, Theatre Gemini, Vivid Theatre Ensemble, and Wings and Feet. The life expectancy for these new companies was regrettably short. As they struggled with all of the problems small troupes typically face, they found themselves competing in a theatrical arena that had grown faster than the existing audience base. A 1993 status-check of the twenty-one companies listed above revealed that nine were untraceable, without phone or forwarding address; ten used answering machines to take their calls; and only two, the Junior Black Academy of Arts and Letters and Teatro Dallas, had phone staff available.

The year 1990 was also one of loss for Dallas theatre. Ken Bryant, artistic director of the Dallas Theater Center, died after accidentally receiving an incorrect injection from a paramedic, following an October automobile accident. The thirty-five year old Bryant, charged with administrating Dallas's largest, most popular, and financially stable

theatre, was known for his cooperativeness and willingness to assist struggling young companies. Bryant had been characterized as an idealistic representative of the burgeoning Dallas stage scene.⁵⁷ Though a search committee was formed by the Theater Center to select a new artistic director, Bryant's death cast a pall upon the local theatre community.

The problem of locating suitable performance space, a situation that had plagued many theatres for the past three years, eased slightly in 1991. Due to a number of events, both fortunate and unfortunate, a variety of locations became available that were suitable for the smaller alternative theatre companies. A company, known as Pure Light Productions, stepped in to provide management and leasing of several small spaces in the Deep Ellum district. One such space, the attic above Dave's Art Pawn Shop, provided the first home for the Kitchen Dog Theatre. A former Volkswagen parts warehouse, on South Lamar Street, was turned into two performance spaces by Pure Light Productions. The Undermain Theatre, having experienced location problems of its own during building repairs, developed a second location on Elm Street, this site with seating for eighty to one hundred audience members. Owning two different performance spaces allowed the Undermain to offer either their basement or Elm Street location for rent for performances and rehearsals by other groups. The Hickory Street Annex, formerly Matthew

Posey's Theatre Garage, reconfigurable for one hundred seats also became available, and the old W.P.A. Building was made available for new occupants when the Addison Centre Theatre moved into a new six-million dollar facility. Recognizing the irregularity of their production schedules, some of the smaller theatre companies opted to sublet their spaces.

Unfortunately, none of the available spaces would solve the needs of the larger, more established Dallas Repertory Theatre, which in 1991 faced a housing problem of its own. In the earlier solid business economy, the Dallas business community, as corporate hosts, were willing to absorb the costs of a theatre located in the retail complex of NorthPark Center. Ray Nasher, president of NorthPark, speaking of theatres in shopping centers, once stated, "They improve the quality of life in a way you can't measure monetarily" 58. For nearly twenty-three years, the Dallas Repertory Theatre had enjoyed the use of space in NorthPark Center. Technically, the theatre paid no rent with its one dollar-a-year lease, but it was responsible for the nearly four thousand-a-month taxes and maintenance fees. At the end of their latest ten-year lease in 1994, the Dallas Rep was to start paying rent on some of the priciest retail space in Dallas, in addition to the former monthly charges. By August 1991, local theatre critics had identified the Dallas Repertory Theatre as the next likely entry on the city's "dead theater" list, and by December the Rep had presented

their last show at NorthPark.⁵⁹ Since then the company has staged Six Women with Brain Death at the Crescent Theatre on Cedar Springs, but for all practical purposes, the Dallas Repertory Theatre is without a home. As a postscript, the Nasher Company, which owns NorthPark, plans to bulldoze the former home of the Dallas Rep to provide more parking for the highly successful mall.⁶⁰

The year 1991 appeared to be a perilous period for many theatres, nationally and locally. The League of Resident Theatres, Theatre Communications Group, Actors Equity Association, and the National Endowment for the Arts all reported nationwide closings of regional professional theaters: Alaska Repertory, Actors' Theatre of St. Paul, Atlanta's Academy Theatre, New York's Hudson Guild, the BACA Downtown space in Brooklyn, Los Angeles' Back Alley Theatre; and New Jersey's Whole Theatre, to cite just a few.⁶¹ Actors Equity reported that many regional theatres were sliding backward in their hard-won standings with the union. The Negro Ensemble Company in New York, Charlotte Rep in North Carolina and other companies were downgrading their contract status with Equity to "Letter of Agreement," an entry-level contract, because they couldn't afford to pay Equity members the wages of higher-level contracts.⁶²

While the Dallas Repertory Theatre was Dallas's most prominent theatre loss in 1991, it was not the only one. The Minority Actors Guild disbanded, complaining of underfunding

by the city; artistic director, Matthew Posey left the Deep Ellum Theatre Garage for Los Angeles, ostensibly to cover the financial losses of the Theatre Garage; the Dallas Alliance Theatre moved to Amsterdam, Holland, at the invitation of Dutch investors; and the Moving Target Theatre was disbanded by artistic director, Jeff Dannick.⁶³

When a tightened economy threatens the very existence of local theatres, knowing how to provide some degree of financial stability becomes critical. Unfamiliar new plays and classics will take a back-seat to commercially safe shows that have been a hit on Broadway. An embarrassing situation developed in 1991 as the area's larger theatres were "...all trying to climb onto the same boats for safety" ⁶⁴. No less than four companies, - Theatre Three, the Dallas Repertory, and the Dallas Theatre Center- announced their intentions to present Wendy Wasserstein's The Heidi Chronicles, while Pace Theatricals sought to include the Broadway tour of The Heidi Chronicles in the NCNB Broadway Series at the Majestic Theatre. David Mamet's Speed the Plow was a production of contention among the Theater Center, the Open Stage, and the Actor's Theatre of Dallas. Production rights to Neil Simon's Rumors were granted, by Samuel French, to both the Dallas Repertory Theatre and Theatre Three, creating an unfortunate rivalry between two companies courting the same audience. Skirmishes over production rights are counterproductive because the competition among theatres does nothing but

reduce the available productions to a community and produce resentment. The larger theatre has the advantage in such conflicts because the licensing agents are interested in the theatre that can sell the most tickets. In view of the financial problems confronting these theatres, the competitive shuffleboard is understandable, but unfortunate.

The animosity among Dallas's theatres over programming could not help but seep into the overall relationships of these companies. The lack of a cooperative spirit among area theatres, reluctance to share information about their operations, and a general level of suspicion were all evident during a 1990-91 attempt to gather information about the theatre and their audiences by the newly-formed Dallas Theatre Caucus. Kurt Kleinmann, from the Pegasus Theatre, created the survey in an attempt to organize local theater into a loose network to foster collective action and share resources. The response to the survey was discouraging. Of the fifty-three producing theatre organizations that were surveyed, only sixteen companies responded.⁶⁵ The limited response appears to confirm that the current Dallas theatre scene is composed of small, highly wary theatre companies. "What we can't seem to make them understand," noted Kleinmann, "is that the cooperative spirit doesn't take anything away from individual theatres' identities" ⁶⁶. The responses of fifteen theatres, regarding their total expenses for 1991, indicated that approximately \$10.07 million had been filtered

through the Dallas economy by the fifteen groups. The Caucus survey further illustrated that most Dallas theatre companies have annual total operating budgets well under \$500,000, and that most companies have combined artistic and business staffs of fewer than ten people.⁶⁷ All respondents who provided financial data did so only on the condition that their responses be kept confidential. While the efforts of the Dallas Theatre Caucus to foster area cooperation were admittedly a failure, Kleinmann was successful, on a smaller scale, in the creation of Chimera, a consortium of the Pegasus Theatre, Undermain, Deep Ellum Theatre Garage, Addison Centre Theatre, and Teatro Dallas. Having survived for three years, Chimera associates see themselves as testimony that a larger Theatre Caucus or theatre league could prove beneficial for area theatres.

One benefit of cooperation among area theatres involves the formation of a collective that, through special arrangement with Actors' Equity, would permit more Dallas companies to use Equity actors, on a limited basis, without declaring themselves as an all Equity house, a luxury few small theatres can afford. This new initiative, known as the Umbrella Production Company proposal, permits a dozen or more small companies to pool their resources and form a collective that would jointly administrate one Small Professional Theatre Contract. The Umbrella Company would contract to hire a certain number of Equity actors and stage managers per

season and then distribute the contracts to the member companies.⁶⁸ The Umbrella plan was created by Dallas small theatre representatives, working collectively, and the arrangement has received the approval of the Western Advisory Board of Equity. Acceptance of the Umbrella proposal faced one last hurdle, that of securing approval from Equity's New York governing body. Yet the overall benefits, creating more work for Equity actors and increasing the professionalism, depth, and range of artistry available to area theatres, certainly merits support from Equity. (The Umbrella Production Company proposal was later approved in 1992.)

Resuscitative efforts by two theatres were successful by the end of 1991. The thirty-year old Theatre Three, champion of the perpetual cash-crisis and facing eviction from its Quadrangle Shopping Center location, was able to refinance its contract for the purchase of its space. The Dallas Theater Center, having spent an entire year without an artistic director, announced its selection of Richard Hamburger, of Maine's Portland Stage Company as its new artistic director.

By May 1992, Theatre Three's existence was threatened by overwhelming financial straits. Although Theatre Three would appear to be fiscally sound, with near ownership of its own building and relatively debt-free, what Theatre Three didn't have, according to executive producer Jac Alder, was enough money to support its staff or put on a season.⁶⁹ The

city's second-oldest theatre company laid-off its entire staff; its board members voted to postpone the season and they also considered closing the theatre because of funding shortfalls.⁷⁰ Production of Stephen Sondheim's Assassins, a run that proved to be the company's most successful production of the year, was initially delayed for two months. Theatre Three managed to do what many American corporations have done in recessionary times: institute severe cost-cutting and lay-off the entire staff. In the case of Theatre Three, telemarketing, box office, and managerial staff were laid-off, and carpenters and electricians were reduced to a single technical director, who was responsible for all production details. Traditional six-week runs were shortened to three weeks and, to date, the theatre has no set schedule, opening or extending shows as its finances permit. The lack of a set schedule and floating production dates causes the biggest problems as the theatre tries to retain its near six thousand subscriber base.⁷¹ "This is what you can do if you're willing," Alder stated, "But this is not the kind of institution we can continue to run. None of us can do this for another year" ⁷². Fortunately, because of friendly terms from the owners of the Quadrangle and new grants from the 500 Inc. and TACA, the facility is no longer jeopardized. The theatre has begun a capital rescue fund to address such problems as regular maintenance. For the first time, the theatre will no longer be dependent on advance subscription

sales to pay past bills - a common phenomena for many American theatre companies. New subscriptions will finance the next season. "The need is still there," Alder notes, "but we're definitely rebuilding" 73.

The financial circumstances that led to the drastic measures taken by Theatre Three casts a harsh light on the standing of Dallas theatre in general. If Theatre Three ultimately closed its doors, Dallas would fall behind Houston, Austin and Fort Worth in the number of Equity houses left in the city. The Dallas Theatre Center would be the sole remaining Equity company in a city once known as the cradle of American regional theatre. With such limited prospects available to the area's professional talent pool, an exodus of actors has begun. Versatile actor, Gray Palmer, like Matthew Posey and Scott Matthews before, has left to pursue a career in Los Angeles. Talented performers Candy Buckley and Jack Willis left Dallas for Boston, and director Robin Stanton left for Chicago. In fact, the majority of the actors in the Dallas Theater Center's former company have left Dallas.⁷⁴ 'Name' actors have not been the only ones to leave the area. Pam Dougherty, Equity liaison for North Texas, noted that one-fourth of the union's entire local membership has left in the last four years.⁷⁵ The number of non-Equity performers to leave the area, can not be documented. Few local industries could survive the loss of five leading employers and one-fourth of the area's labor

pool. And actors were not the only theatre personnel moving on. By the end of 1992, local directors began discussing a shortage of theater technicians, sound engineers, stage managers, and others who make the magic of theatre possible.

From the standpoint of the veneer of its national theatre profile, 1992 looked impressive for Dallas. After all, two multimillion-dollar theatres opened and a Dallasite came home with one of Broadway's coveted Tony Awards. The new Addison Conference and Theatre Centre allowed the Addison Centre Theatre to vacate their old Works Project Administration building, and Southern Methodist University displayed its new Greer Garson Theatre. Thus, while Theatre Three sought a financial lifeline, academic and suburban Addison theatre companies prospered. The year also witnessed Dallasite Roger Horchow bring home a Tony Award for best musical as the Broadway producer of Crazy For You.

Encouraging signs of a new cooperation among Dallas area theatres appeared in 1993 in the form of a flurry of play festivals and the creation of a centralized 'hotline' for theatre information by the newly established Dallas Theatre League. Three festivals, the Big D Festival of the Unexpected, Theatre Three's Festival of the Unfamiliar, and ShortFest '93, all made their debuts within six weeks in June and July. During five weekends in July and August, local playwrights presented public script readings. STAGE (Society for Theatrical Artists' Guidance and Enhancement) produced

its 10th annual playwrights' festival, and Dallas's first international festival, produced by Teatro Dallas, was announced for November.

The purpose of the Big D Festival of the Unexpected, was to showcase new work of all kinds and help writers with the development of their work, or work in progress. The festival was produced by the Dallas Theater Center and was staged in the various rehearsal studios of the Kalita Humphreys Theater - the Theater Center's original facility.⁷⁴ The two-week festival brought together thirty-five playwrights, directors, set designers, and actors to work on five plays in varying stages of development. Audience members were encouraged to share their opinions with the artist, while critics were encouraged to withhold theirs. The noncommercial and artistic aspects of the festival were emphasized by a pay-what-you-can admission policy.

The Festival of the Unfamiliar, sponsored by Theatre Three, came on the heels of the Festival of the Unexpected. Unlike its predecessor's focus on new works, the Festival of the Unfamiliar imported finished productions from small theatre companies around the state.⁷⁵ Several shows by ethnic groups from Houston and San Antonio were featured, as well as Dallas's New Arts Six, a gospel theatre group.⁷⁶

In July, Chimera, an association of six professional alternative theatre companies in Dallas, used ShortFest '93 as an attempt to help 'cross-pollinate' its different

audiences, so that Undermain Theatre-goers, for instance, might sample something from the Pegasus Theatre.⁷⁷ The six companies presented one-act shows at the Addison Centre Theatre, with three shows performed each night. A food court and a Saturday afternoon Chimera for Kids festival, with clowns and performances for children, added to the event.⁷⁸

The Playwrites Project Inc. produced five summer weekends of script readings by local playwrights in the basement space, Three Below, located in Theatre Three.⁷⁹ And STAGE, a service and resource organization for area companies and artists, sponsored in August its annual playwrights' festival, Stages '93. The festival featured national and emerging local playwrights and also provided production opportunities for local designers, directors, and actors.⁸⁰

Following the innovative lead of Fort Worth's Live Theatre League of Tarrant County, a newly formed Dallas Theatre League, coordinated another milestone of cooperation for area theater companies with their creation of a theatre 'hotline' for the Dallas metroplex.⁸¹ The Dallas Theatre League, dedicated to promoting local stage companies, instituted the computerized service donated by the IT Network. Dialing (214) 890-9000, and then entering PLAY (7529) provides access to production information of every area theatre, and then transfer to the theatre's box office phone is available, if desired. A new brochure listing

seventy-five area stage companies with their phone numbers, production schedules, and location is another project developed by the League. The brochure, which is updated every three months, was financed by a local pizza company, after Southern Methodist University arranged for the printing, and is distributed to area theatres. The League has formed action committees to target several immediate projects such as creating television announcements to promote the new hotline.

The Cultural Endowment Fund, an innovative achievement in Texas funding for the arts, was established in September 1993 by the Texas legislature. A collaboration between the private and public sectors, The Cultural Endowment provides seed money for an arts trust fund. The effort represented a major shift in the historically ambivalent attitude toward the arts by Texas legislators and created a partnership between the Texas Commission on the Arts and a newly created Cultural Trust Council.⁸² The fourteen member Cultural Trust Council will raise private funds and the Texas Commission on the Arts will add \$2.2 million to provide the seed money to create a two hundred million fund over the next twelve to fifteen years. The fund is designed to be an exclusive and dependable source of revenue that will not be subject to legislative changes or the economic climate. "We're the first state in the country to introduce something like this," stated Margaret Mills, chairwoman of the Cultural Trust

Council. "We've ranked so low in per capita funding for the arts for so many years, ...now we're a trendsetter," concluded Ms. Mills.⁸³ The legislation further authorizes the creation of special 'Texas - State of the Arts' license plates to generate revenue, and it also created a House-Senate task force to explore options for a dedicated source of revenue to feed the fund. The legislation also allows the Texas Commission on the Arts to form an acquisitions committee, which will seek contributions of real or personal property to be donated to the trust. Investment and administration responsibilities for the trust are to be handled by the Texas Commission on the Arts.

While 1993 spawned a new crop of stage companies in the area, such as the Extra Virgin Performance Cooperative, the Thin Dime Theater Company, ValArt Productions, and Wickerplane Productions, there was also a new Equity theatre among them. Three businessmen, Bernard Stoller, Phillip Allen, and Jeff Dannack, with roots in non-profit theatre, founded the The Mistral Theatre as a commercial for-profit theatre. The company adapted and moved into the old Mistral nightclub, a 200-seat facility located in the lobby of Loews Anatole Hotel. A location in the lobby of a popular hotel, one that books conventions two to three years in advance, made the commercial possibilities of The Mistral particularly appealing. The sizeable convention traffic, combined with local sales, suggested almost a subscription-base stability,

according to the theatre's producers.⁸⁴ The theatre's first production, shrewdly chosen with the Texas conventioner and tourist in mind, was The Last Cowboy, in which a former ranch hand-performer, backed by a two-member band, tells stories and sings about the old West. The three producers are also responsible for forming Megillah Entertainment, the production company behind the *Mistral*, and responsible for administering local Equity contracts to small professional theatres.

The myriad of small theatre companies which producing in an ever-chaotic shuffle of performance spaces, has need of more than the dedication of its devotees to assure their survival. Karen Collins, a young Dallas philanthropist interested in theatre management, created with Zoe Artz Projects a new structure for embryonic companies. Since many of these developing companies face extinction before they can establish a non-profit status, Zoe Artz Projects (ZAP) provides a cooperative non-profit umbrella that performing arts entities may use after paying a small membership fee. The non-profit umbrella permits them to achieve a 'piggyback' non-profit status, which, in turn, enables the young companies to receive tax-deductible donations. ZAP supports film and dance showcases as well as the 11th Street Theatre Project, the theatrical production arm of the umbrella organization. The 11th Street Theatre Project assists its members with locating facilities, a pay-what-you-can rent

agreement for performance space in St. Matthew's Cathedral, publicity, and the use of its non-profit status for its fifteen dollar-a-year membership.⁸⁵ With the 1993 addition of at least ten more companies to the Dallas scene, beyond the forementioned five, the concept of Zoe Artz Projects may be a harbinger of positive support for the arts. In September 1993, the following theatre companies were identified by the Dallas Morning News as new on the scene: Actors on Call, the Deep Ellum Opera Theatre, the Lean Theatre, the New Artists Theatre Company, the New Horizons Theatre Co., the New Theatre, the Theatre Dispatch, the Third Planet Theatre, We're Still Here Players, and Windmill Productions.⁸⁶ It appears that survival instincts are still strong for Dallas theatre.

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CHAPTER III

In the mid 1980s, the Dallas theatre scene looked as if it might become the next Minneapolis or Seattle, at the least a significant regional hub with a core of six Equity houses producing nationally-recognized work. This Equity core was surrounded by a growing number of alternative theatres in Deep Ellum, minority companies, and suburban playhouses. Yet, this promising picture was to be short-lived. A major shift in the Texas economy, combined and fueled by a national recession, would reek havoc on groups dependent on the benevolence of corporate and government support and this was particularly true for the arts.

For Texas theatres the debilitating economic effects were two-pronged, coming from both the state and national level. With a tightened economy, certain predictable outcomes occurred, which touched all Dallas theatres. Some theatre companies endured financial hardships and insolvency until they were forced to close their doors, which they did at the rate of one Equity company a year from 1987-1992.¹

What happened to Dallas specifically is what many observers had predicted for the arts in general during the Reagan years. When donations and government support become tight, the arts organizations grew conservative and profit-

oriented as a necessity for survival. To become profit-oriented, theatres found themselves doing what the rest of corporate America does in such circumstances: they down-size, cut-back, and cut-out.

The Texas economic crunch can be traced to the recession in the oil industry, which appeared to bottom-out between 1986 and 1987, Yet, the fallout would last for years. In 1980, Texas ranked first in the United States in gas and oil production, with total volume that year of 931 million barrels of crude oil and seven trillion cubic feet of natural gas.² By 1986, crude oil production was down to 785 million barrels and natural gas under six trillion cubic feet.³ The decreases of oil and gas production reached their lowest points in seven years. At the same time that oil and natural gas production decreased, the market value of the two fuels decreased: dropping from a high of \$34.57 per barrel of crude oil in 1981, to a low of \$14.72 per barrel in 1986.⁴ Although natural gas dollar values did not follow crude oil values on a year-to-year basis, natural gas reached \$2.30 for each million cubic feet in 1984 and dropped to \$1.55 for each million cubic feet in 1986.⁵ As more Arabian oil was imported, Texas oil production was reduced and oil prices plummeted.

The impact of the reduction of the oil and gas industry on the Texas economy was severe. In 1986, Texas, the third most populous state in the nation, had an unemployment rate

of 8.9%, the second highest in the nation.⁶ Other economic indicators, such as the Consumer Price Index, revealed that the cost of goods and services increased from 254.1 in 1980 to 347.2 in 1987, representing an almost 29% increase over seven years.⁷ While the cost of goods and services was going up, effective buying power was going down.⁸

The effects of an oil industry slump extended beyond a single industry or market, as its production, or lack of it, affected nearly every other manufacturing operation or industrial operation in the state. Thus, with 726,000 Texans unemployed in 1986, goods and services up 29%, and buying power down, something had to give. Both City and State funding to the arts were curtailed. Theatres that had once received grants from the City of Dallas were warned in 1987 to expect funding cuts from seventeen to twenty-two percent.⁹ As the Texas state budget made its own cutbacks, most often in the social services, what funds corporations had to give were aimed at emergency services, such as health care facilities. As corporations reduced their operations and laid-off employees, they could hardly justify their continued donations to the arts. The closing of the New Arts Theatre in 1987 was directly related to the theatre company's inability to secure \$50,000 donation in corporate donations, a figure that would have been considered reasonable during the boom days.¹⁰

Dallas theatre companies were not the only theatres

affected by the lack of corporate donors. Twenty-five professional companies nationwide had failed since 1987, eight in 1992, according to Barbara Janowitz, director of management and government programs for Theatre Communications Group.¹¹ "We see it directly in corporate contributions going down," Janowitz notes. "In some areas, they've just vanished in the face of the recession and other pressing social needs that aren't being addressed" ¹². Ms. Janowitz also reflected that, "repeated theater closing are what we should expect when our banks fail, our savings and loans self-destruct and our real estate markets remain mired in a recession" ¹³.

A fundamental shift in federal spending under the Reagan and Bush administrations caused funding reductions from the national level to complete the two-pronged assault upon the already vulnerable Dallas theatres. In order to pay for the largest peace time military buildup in United States history, without raising taxes, President Ronald Reagan effectively made America a debtor nation. According to a May 1989 report by Lester Salamon of Johns Hopkins University and Alan J. Abramson of the Urban Institute, an estimated \$113 billion was drawn out of human resources, with the exception of Medicare, to help pay for the military buildup through the 1980s.¹⁴ Federal budget cuts to social services compounded the effects of state and local cuts and sent struggling social agencies into direct competition with arts groups for

corporate donations. The resulting clash of interests generally left arts groups as the losers. Zelda Fichandler, founder of Washington's Arena Stage, wrote, in a recent issue of American Theatre magazine, that arts funding on state, local, federal, corporate, and foundation levels had been "redirected and diffused in the face of proliferating demand" from hard-pressed social programs.¹⁵

Although the greatest part of funding reductions and budget cutbacks in the late 1980s were tied directly to the economy, controversy over the National Endowment for the Arts, and its grant accountability, followed on the heels of the economic problems and was used as a political weapon by conservative Republicans as a continuing rationale to deny funding to the NEA. What had begun as an outrage over the controversial subjects of artists Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe, recipients of NEA grants, escalated into a senatorial showdown in which Senator Joseph D'Amato and Senator Jessie Helms denounced NEA grants and advocated the total elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts.¹⁶ Political analysts believed that President George Bush fired William Frohnmayer, his own appointee as director of the NEA, to keep conservative presidential candidate, Patrick Buchanan, from making an issue out of the NEA controversy. Soon after Bush appointed Dr. Anne-Imelda Radice to serve as acting director of the NEA, he presented his personal stance against NEA restrictions, but established that grant

recipients would sign a 'no obscenity - loyalty oath.' 17. Bush went on record to say that, "some of the art funded by the NEA does not have my enthusiastic approval." 18.

Public funding of the arts continued to be a sticky issue in the late 1980s, one that manifested itself in grant denials by the National Endowment for the Arts. What seems to be at issue was that the government has no cultural policy, but it had public money. Many conservative groups including 'Pro Family' and 'Taxpayers for Accountability in Government' have called for the complete cut-off of funds to the NEA. Ms. Janowitz explained that, "...what might seem to be political posturing, a way to appease conservatives or gain votes by championing 'decency,' has had direct and adverse effects on arts groups. The financial ramifications of the political attacks are that the theatres have lost a tremendous amount of leverage and actual dollars. The NEA's budget, in order to equal the 1981 budget in real dollars, would have to be \$260 million" 19. The agency's current budget is \$174.1 million.

As the loss of substantial donations and grant support took its toll on Dallas theatres, the survivors dug in deeper and prepared to fortify themselves against the storms to come. Theatre critic Jerome Weeks had described the 1987 theatre scene as one of retrenchment in the face of economic adversity, but the retrenchment was evident both fiscally and artistically. As arts observers had predicted when donations

and government support became tight, the arts organizations grew conservative and profit-oriented. Peter Zeisler, director of the Theatre Communications Group, identified this as an "artistic deficit." Zeisler stated, "America's theaters may be surviving at the cost of an "artistic deficit." Trustees are forcing theater management to earn a higher percentage of income with ticket sales" 20. Zeisler called this, "...fund raising at the box office. It can lead to a commercial sensibility in choosing plays that will guarantee income, as well as fewer rehearsals and simpler, less expensive or less experimental works" 21. And indeed, Dallas's productions of 1987 were marked by fewer subscription seasons than the year before, fewer productions, shorter runs, shorter rehearsal times, and a somewhat predictable selection of plays: three theatres produced The House of Blue Leaves, two theatres planned Pump Boys and Dinettes, while a third considered it, and two theatres staged Glengarry Glen Ross. The trend was to use the same shows as a fiscal safety net. The 'commercial sensibility', or programming what 'will sell,' seemed the obvious reason for the West End Cabaret's decision to abandon theatrical productions for musical revues and nightclub shows. The announced change in focus came after an excellent premiere of Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill, but the intent to be more commercially-viable was apparent in the quick change of direction.

The oil slump economy affected not just donations, but box office sales as well. Patrons were spending more cautiously. More than one Dallas theatre manager acknowledged, that it is hard to sell a fifteen dollar theatre ticket when you can rent a video cassette for three. An economic slump had become a cultural slump.

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CHAPTER IV

There are those who would believe that all theatre problems are connected to funding or the lack of it. They would be wrong. Just as there is no single solution to improving the prospects for Dallas theatres, there is no one cause of its troubles. Instead, their problems are interconnected and their outcomes often predictable. This chapter will address the issues that extend beyond the financial woes of area theatres. Admittedly the availability of unlimited funds would go a long way toward eliminating, or even dilluting other concerns, but the political realities are such that unlimited funds are not thrown at arts groups, and theatres must initiate some sustenance of their own.

The single biggest issue for Dallas's theatres, beyond funding needs, is that of an audience deficit. This was supported by critic Jerome Weeks's grim observation that "not a single Dallas theater can regularly draw a full, paying house on opening night" ¹. This situation may be partly neglect, a matter of subscribers buying season tickets and not bothering to attend. But the lack of a committed Dallas audience exemplifies an endemic problem for local theatres that is most often the basis for every other problem. Adrian Hall, former artistic director of the Dallas Theater Center,

scorned the attitude of Dallas audiences; "They tell me this play is selling out. Why then, do I see row upon row of empty seats? Why do people buy season subscriptions and not show up? I don't want to take their money if they're not seeing any theater" ². Hall often expressed his opinion that it was ridiculous that a city the size of Dallas did not have a theatre with twenty thousand subscribers, a number he had collected for Trinity Square Rep in a less affluent and populous Providence, Rhode Island. Other noted artistic directors, such as Patrick Kelly, formerly of Stage #1, and Stephen Hollis, formerly of the New Arts Theatre, shared similar sentiments when both directors used the same words: "If nobody sees the play, what's the point?" ³

Because Dallas theatres actually emerged during the ascent of non-profit regional theatres and the decline of the commercial Broadway theater, it's ironic that Dallas audiences haven't followed the pattern established in other regional cities by developing an institutional loyalty for their regional theatres. Instead, attendance statistics show that local audiences are fickle; following the latest recognizable hit, or Broadway touring show. Dallas's fascination with anything remotely 'Broadway-bound' has been exploited by New York producers, who recognized the possibilities in Dallas as a 'try-out' city for New York-bound productions. New York producers were quick to identify the gala-like support at Dallas openings and take advantage

of the extensive media coverage afforded them. As previously mentioned in an earlier chapter, the only organization to enjoy any subscription loyalty in Dallas is the Dallas Summer Musicals, which, of course, lends nothing to local theatre.

Dallas theatres, in contrast, find themselves starting over with each show to win back their audience. Showing little evidence of theatre loyalty, Dallas audiences are often 'cherry-pickers,' whose 'wait and see attitude' plays havoc with ticket sales. Most directors agree that the biggest single seller of tickets is word-of-mouth. According to Jerry Russell, artistic director of Fort Worth's Stage West, "When a show catches on...and they tell their friends, all the impediments that can hinder a show's sales - bad weather, ticket snafus, lukewarm reviews - won't keep them away. They'll come" 4.

The conservatism of Dallas audiences is often cited as a reason many Dallasites are less-likely to support new and untested material, and therefore they shun the experimental nature of many regional theatres. Theatre Three has experienced first-hand, the resistance of theatre-goers to view certain plays as applicable to themselves. "Dallas audiences can be very provincial," Theatre Three producer, Jac Alder stated: "The chilly response to several...works by South African playwright Athol Fugard is the best example. People just didn't accept the metaphor of apartheid as relevant" 5. On the other hand, shows aimed at particular

audiences, that have name recognition - Fences and Ain't Misbehavin', productions of the Dallas Repertory Theatre - do very well. New plays appear to be the most difficult to sell. Most theatre-goers simply will not take a chance on them, even though they do it every weekend with new films. One director claimed that a show is a hard sell if you have a hard time explaining it over the phone to callers.⁶

Some local observers believe that something in the very nature of Dallas may be hostile to theater. One director theorized that it is such a striving city, that people simply don't have much emotional energy left over at the end of the day. It can be a harsh, demanding city, and entertainment is expected to soothe rather than stimulate.⁷

The loss of an audience, or a theatre unable to secure an audience by defining its own niche in the community, will inevitably result in the loss of the theatre. Thus, effective identification of one's audience profile would appear to be sound marketing. But to date the most recent incidence of such a survey for Dallas, is from 1986, one conducted by MARC Inc. for the Dallas Theater Center. Since then, most theatre directors have shied away from audience surveys, believing that surveys are based on manipulative calculation, of scheduling plays just to fill the seats, and of being dishonest with one's art and one's audience.

Further, there are those artistic directors, who believe that audience involvement in programming should not be a

concern of the theatre. These directors insist that a theatre's season represents a director's sensibilities. In effect, when one subscribes to Theatre Three's offerings, one is subscribing to Jac Alder's tastes, or to the tastes of Richard Hamburger at the Dallas Theater Center, or to Kurt Kleinmann's tastes at the Pegasus Theatre. The role of the theatre, then, becomes one of educating their subscribers, getting them in the doors with plays they like, and overcoming their audiences' resistance to classical or new material, they may discover they like. "Choosing the right season, according to director, Stephen Hollis, becomes the single most important and difficult task for an artistic director" 8.

While audience surveys hold little esteem in program development for area theatres, their importance to audience development should not be underestimated. For a theatre to know who in the community they are reaching, as well as who they are not, should be the single most effective tool for locating and cultivating new audience members. The MARC questionnaire, conducted by the Dallas Theater Center, was handed out with programs at the DTC during the run of The Tavern, in April, 1986. Two thousand subscribers and one thousand single-ticket buyers were used as the sample for the survey, which drew the following conclusions about their own audience.⁹ Many of the survey's conclusions were common sense: Theatre-goers have money. Nearly three-fourths of DTC

subscribers make more than \$40,000 annually. Only half the single-ticket buyers earn more than that, but then half of them are also unmarried. Most subscribers are married. The audience is not ethnically diverse. The majority of subscribers are older than 35, while the majority of single-ticket buyers are younger. Single-ticket buyers are generally new to town, rent rather than own their homes, and put more credence in reviews and word-of-mouth than subscribers. The survey also confirmed for the Dallas area, the large overlap among arts patrons in general: About one-fourth of the Dallas Theater Center subscribers also support the ballet and the opera. Nearly one-half of DTC supporters also support the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and the Dallas Summer Musicals. Two-thirds of DTC supporters visit the Dallas Museum of Art.

One inroad into audience development by the Dallas Theater Center, as a result of their survey, was the creation of Project Discovery as a means of reaching high school students who might not otherwise attend the renowned theatre. Large blocks of tickets at a minimal price are committed to Project Discovery for each production. Such attempts to open the doors to new audience members will ultimately make the difference between acceptance and support of area theatres or an alienation and abandonment of them. The theatres that survive will do so by developing their audiences and answering a need in their community. Those theatres that

view themselves as the sole proprietors of wisdom, beauty, and truth, merely awaiting the public to attend and worship at the shrine, will be lost.

When an audience is not found, or effectively developed, the intertwined scenario of the struggle, failure, and exodus of the theatre is only too familiar. A struggling theatre, unable to make even one third of its income through ticket sales, considers its options. First, it may attempt to program more commercially, at the sacrifice of its individual mission and imagination. When the economic whip comes down, governing boards are no longer interested in plays that question, investigate, or disturb, but only those that appeal to the widest possible paying audience. Theatre critic Richard West described the essence of the popular season: "A Shakespeare comedy; a cheerful small-cast musical; a thigh-slapping New York hit; a sweet old American chestnut; a lighthearted, Broadway-bound, small-cast, to-be-announced new play; and of course, A Christmas Carol" 10. The scramble in tough economic times, for 'safe-shows' by Dallas theatres, has already been historically documented. Pressures to be commercially successful do nothing to encourage the growth of regional theatre, and such cautious programming merely duplicates the offerings of the Broadway touring shows.

When financial difficulties cause the theatre's rent to go unpaid, or the rent becomes prohibitive, as the history of the Plaza Theatre and the Dallas Repertory Theatre suggested,

eviction and the loss of the facility typically follow. For some struggling theatres, the lost facility may mean the dissolution of the company, or, the beginning of the hopscotch game of working in available performance spaces. The lack of a permanent facility compounds a theatres' problem of developing a loyal audience.

Free-market thinking might suggest that the loss of several small theatre companies would inevitably make the remaining companies more viable and competitive by opening up a larger market share to them. That has not been the case for area theatres. In Dallas, the loss of a few has endangered those that remain. This is because the theatres are interconnected in their use of resources, artists, and facilities. When the Lyric Opera of Dallas canceled its upcoming season in March 1993, it canceled the rental of one of the Undermain Theatre's rehearsal spaces. When the Lean Theatre Company and another independent producer canceled productions also scheduled there, the small Deep Ellum company found itself in a life-threatening cash crisis.¹¹

The loss of Equity houses and small area theatres prompts Dallas theatre professionals to leave for more lucrative opportunities. The exodus and loss of influential artists and leaders, such as artistic directors Jack Clay, Adrian Hall, Ed De Latte, Patrick Kelly, Ken Bryant, Matthew Posey, and Scott Matthews, as well as theatre management professionals Peter Donnelly, and Jeff West, has been

significant and debilitating to an already unstable arts community. Critic Jerome Weeks notes that Dallas must be setting some sort of managerial turnover record for the arts: "Right now this city's longest-tenured artistic director of one of the big four is the Theater Center's Richard Hamburger. He has been here for all of 11 months" 12. There is also the matter of departure of nearly one fourth of the area's Equity membership and an indeterminate number of non-equity performers. It is demonstratively true that if actors and directors don't find an audience, they will move on - usually to New York or Los Angeles, - and if the public isn't challenged by good local theater, it will settle for Broadway imports at the Dallas Summer Musicals. One must recognize that while the exodus of artists from the Dallas talent pool has often been cited as an additional reason for the plight of our theatres, the exodus is a symptom of the problem and not the problem itself. For if the Dallas theatre scene were healthy and economically sound, its talent pool would not be in exodus.

Finally, there is a problem that threatens not only the Dallas area theatres but the arts community as a whole. In a time when Dallas City Hall budget battles have become increasingly bloody, and partisan politics affect every decision, Dallas arts supporters and theatre companies are facing an endangered cultural life. Although the iceberg is hardly detectable on the surface, two new museums will soon

open and the Arts District lists a healthy calendar of upcoming activities what lies below the surface is ominous.

The Dallas Plan was introduced to the City Council in June 1993. This new plan is designed to change the way the city works by changing how and where it spends its money. "We are in the midst of a well-managed decline," reported Councilman Domingo Garcia.¹² Dallas's decline is easy to document. According to the plan, the city's tax base has been shrinking steadily since the mid-1980s as businesses flee to the northern suburbs. Dallas has the highest office vacancy rate of any American city. Nearly forty percent of Dallas streets are substandard and the cost of repairing them is estimated at six hundred million. More ominous still, the region is growing faster than the city, and by the year 2025 the city will contain less than twenty percent of the region's population.¹⁴

It appears that Dallas theatre groups, like most arts institutions, face rough days ahead. All of the signs are there. Recently, for example, the City Council was asked to approve emergency funding to repair the Meyerson Symphony Center's air conditioning. Though neither the issue or the sum was of great consequence, council members went on the attack, saying that until higher priorities, such as police protection and street repairs were taken care of, much art funding should be deferred.¹⁵ It has often been the nature of theatre companies and theatre artists to be self-absorbed

in their art. Such is the nature of art, characterized as a 'hard mistress.' This inattention to everything but the work at hand may be the reason that audience development is totally neglected by many small theatre companies. Theatre people are often guilty of the Field of Dreams philosophy: 'if we give a good show, the people will come.'

Too often, small theatre companies fail to realize that to survive in a political world, they, too, must master the 'art' of the political. For small theatre companies, the 'art' of the political involves finding the balance between nurturing artistic financial support and maintaining their own artistic identity. Political realities being what they are, the arts in Dallas are still regarded by some as not an integral part of city life, but rather as frills benefiting the privileged few. According to Philip Seib, former assistant director of the Dallas Museum of Art, "Arts supporters have yet to convince powerful people in this town that vibrant cultural life and safe streets are not mutually exclusive" 16. If politicians feel no pressure from their constituents, or fail to see a significant body of organized arts supporters, they will follow the path of least resistance: hence, "dump the arts and hire more cops" 17. Here lies the fragility of the arts, for politicians accountability to one's voters, will always take precedence over aesthetics.

The political balance or importance of maintaining ones'

artistic identity may be found in a recent study that suggests that while "The arts are good for business, ... business isn't necessarily good for the arts" 18. According to Alisa Solomon, many nonprofit institutions have done everything that the foundations, government officials and the business executives on their boards have urged. And they've found themselves concentrating less on creating art because they're so burdened with managers and buildings and debt.¹⁹ Admittedly directed at smaller theatre groups, Ms. Solomon's argument runs counter to the conventional wisdom of the past three decades. Solomon believes that the organizational structure that has become the mainstay of nonprofits - the artistic director/managing director/board of trustees pyramid - may be wrong for some smaller groups that have worked well on a more collective basis. Although the corporate-like structure was designed to 'look good' to potential money-givers, the inflated administrations have proved themselves something of a burden during the funding and censorship crises of the past several years. Some board members, coming from the business community, have little understanding that nonprofits were established as an alternative to commercial theatre. The stress on corporate-style management has also led to a hustling commercialism among established resident theaters. Princeton sociologist Paul DiMaggio surveyed the country's resident theaters in the 1970s and found that the more financially stable a company was, the less innovative it

was.²⁰ Contrary to public declarations, business managers and board members often influenced programming with market concerns assuming priority. Thus, while mastering the art of the political becomes essential to ones' fiscal existence, mastering the art of political independence may become essential to ones' artistic identity.

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CHAPTER V

An examination of a new theatre directory created by the Dallas Theatre League reveals an unexpected profile of Dallas Area Theatre. A production schedule for September, October, and November lists performance information for forty-six theatres producing in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The back of the brochure provides a general map and telephone numbers for the seventy-six theatres represented in the publication. In 1993, there are more theatre companies fighting to find their place in this area than at any time in the city's existence. The question remains: in view of a disparate and detached theatre scene, with a neglectful, if not indifferent public, can all of these companies find an audience in Dallas, Texas?

While the remarkable growth of these theatre companies seems unparalleled, with company banners rising as quickly as one a week, the only constant appears to be the artists involved. "The creative people behind these companies keep resurfacing, often with sharper skills than before the dissolution of the previous production entity" ¹. The previous company may be abandoned in name, but, in Dallas, the artistic director or actor who founded it, usually steps into another vehicle with another production company

immediately. The resiliency of Dallas area directors and producers is undoubtedly responsible for the entrepreneurial spirit flourishing in the current wave of new theatres.

Some have questioned whether theatre producers and artists wouldn't have a better chance of success if they joined together to keep what companies they already have alive. After all, the multitude of new companies have drawn from the same talent pool, and they ultimately draw upon the same resources and available performance spaces. Yet their biggest test of survival remains, that of finding an audience.

This chapter will consider audience development, review of the positive effects Dallas area theatres have recently pursued, and conclude with some recommendations for improving the prospects of Dallas area theatres. It is to be hoped that a greater understanding of the issues facing area theatres, and arguably all arts organizations, may provide a small foothold to those visionary artists making a stand on an increasingly slippery slope.

A combination of shrewd business management and experience generally assures a better-run theatre, but the better-run theatres are also those that have worked to find their special niche in the community. Few directors and actors are specialists in all theatrical venues, and neither are all regional theatres. For example, with future seasons canceled by the Lyric Opera, the demise of the the Dallas

Rep, and the uncertain future of Theatre Three, "the city has no professional company dedicated, at least in part to presenting musical theater" 2. Those companies who successfully identify their specialty will become more sophisticated in its production, better focus their resources, capitalize on their specialty regarding funding, and better direct their marketing to the audience they wish to develop. It becomes additionally important to effectively communicate that mission to the public and city arts officials.

Once a mission is identified, it should be stated as such, and, though overlapping programming will always occur when genres and styles become blurred, professional companies would not actively compete for the same production areas. Such a cooperative effort among professional companies could expand the available offerings to theatre patrons and bolster mutual support by removing inter-city competition.

Next to the quality of the art on stage, the single most vital endeavor of local theaters is developing and building a loyal audience. Though few definitive references are available on audience development, In Search of An Audience, by Bradley G. Morison and Kay Fliehr, is one of the few. In this work, Morison and Fliehr recount their experiences as public relations staff members charged with developing an audience for the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota.³ Although their research was assembled nearly

twenty-three years ago, their budget and manpower permitted more extensive activity in theatre audience development than had been previously tried before. The continued success and support still enjoyed by the Guthrie Theatre are testimony to the endurance of many of Morison and Fliehr's ideas.

Effective audience development has always been important to the continued existence of a theatre, but now, as the number of Dallas area theatre companies increases and audience members dwindle, some of the recommendations by Morison and Fliehr are timely for Dallas.

Morison and Fliehr attempted to apply basic marketing techniques to the problem of promoting a theatre. Though the word 'sell' is often regarded as a four letter word to many people in the arts, Morison and Fliehr found no reason why proven marketing techniques should not be applied to the development of an arts audience.⁴ Audience development begins by defining the community. Then the appropriate action, large or small, may be planned to fit that community. The Dallas area is a metroplex of many parts, but there are elements bonded together by common interests and purposes. For instance, the Dallas Cowboys football team bonds a significant population in Dallas with a common interest. Employees of the high tech communications industry whose companies are located in a common belt along North Central Expressway share similar careers. The Southern Methodist University population combined with residents of the

University Park area share a common geographic area and income level, and so on. Thus, a basic aim of marketing is efficiency of communication through selectivity of parts.⁵ As it is inefficient, wasteful, and impossible to communicate with everyone, it is essential to identify which groups of people are most likely to be prospects for a particular arts organization. An examination of geographic, demographic, and personality characteristics of a section of the population limits the marketing focus of an arts group and increases its possibilities for a successful marketing program.

The importance of word-of-mouth cannot be underestimated in 'selling the theatre.' The Morison-Fliehr research demonstrated that using comments and recommendations from important people outside an immediate area were more impressive to a local population than the opinions of people within the community. However, they also concluded there was no better audience development technique than person-to-person contact.⁶ Every effort should be made to stimulate personal contact between the theatre's staff and company, its devotees, and the public.

A theatre's image is the total impression a person has of an organization which may, or may not, be valid. Narrowing the gap between how a theatre sees itself and how it is perceived by the public may be difficult. Patrons of the Dallas Theatre Center, Theatre Three, and Pegasus Theatre are distinctively different in appearance, manner, age, and

background. Each has responded to a perceived image of a particular institution and may or may not be willing to cross-over to attend a production by another theatre group. The efforts of Dallas's theatre festivals were a positive move toward encouraging cross-over behavior in theatre attendance, but two of the festivals, the Dallas Theater Center's Big D Festival of the Unexpected and Theatre Three's Festival of the Unfamiliar, were self-contained. The Chimera festival, ShortFest '93 had the best opportunity to mix audiences because six theatre companies were represented in the festival.

According to Morison and Fliehr, the general public tends to think that arts activities are upperclass, long-haired, intellectual, artsy, and sissy.⁷ This image is a formidable obstacle to enlarging and broadening an audience base. How much actual difference there is between the reality of the arts and the public impression or image of them is difficult to say. There are at least some individuals within the arts and patrons of the arts who prefer that image, not wishing to diminish their 'mystique.' For them, to broaden the base of the arts audience might force changes in their private world. Yet if gains are to be made in the development of larger, more representative theatre audiences, the public image will have to be changed.⁸

"What can we do for you?" was a philosophy that evolved out of the Guthrie audience development campaign. It is

based on the belief that "When you give something of importance to every part of your community, the community will not let you fail" 9. The concept of serving the community goes beyond serving four to five percent of the community with great plays. To broaden its base of moral, financial, political and audience support so necessary for stability, the theatre should redefine itself as a community resource, much like a library, upon which all community members might draw. A necessary goal in audience development is to reach those parts of the community which would otherwise never attend the theatre. Finding ways in which the theatre might be of service to churches, drug and alcohol counseling services, retirement and nursing homes, industry, tourism, trade unions, and education, allows the theatre to flourish and develop support from all parts of the community. Additionally, it gives the theatre the opportunity to make itself familiar to those people who have never been exposed to theatrical activities.¹⁰

The Morison-Fliehr work concludes with some important observations about audience development:

1. It is necessary that we expand our audience, not only to enlarge it but to make it representative of the total society.
2. The arts must make their audiences more truly reflect society if they are going to make an effective case for increased government support.

3. The audience has an effect upon the art. If the culture is to be influenced by a majority of the population, then the audience must reflect the majority.
4. Negative impressions about the image of the arts must be reversed.¹¹

The hectic pace of production schedules, deadlines, details, and openings, drives the lives of theatre artists and producers. It is easy to become self-absorbed and self-consumed and ignore the community outside the theatre. Theatres cannot expect to have attention paid to them by every part of the community unless the theatre first pays attention to every part of the community. The key for effective audience development is a desire to serve instead of a wish to be a cultural icon.

A cooperative spirit among Dallas area theatres should not only increase moral, but solve problems as well. Three years ago, attempts by Kurt Kleinmann to organize the Dallas Theatre Caucus failed miserably. Though the Fort Worth 'Live Theatre League of Tarrant' took off in 1991, with its thirteen member companies, Dallas couldn't successfully follow that example. Today, the Dallas Theatre League appears to be leading the way for mutually increased awareness and cooperation. The League's quarterly brochure is teeming with theatre schedules, and its 'one-call does it all' hotline has made production information and securing

tickets state-of-the-art.

The problem of finding suitable performance space has also eased as a result of area theatres working together. The Swiss Avenue Theatre Center, located on the edge of Deep Ellum is expected to become a major facility on the rental-space roster, and it is currently shared by the Rising Moon Theatre Company, the New Horizons Theatre Company, and Theatre Gemini.¹² According to Phil Jones, director of the Cultural Affairs Office, his office may soon provide a catalog of all available performance spaces in the city.¹³

Dallas theatre companies have not been alone in their fight for survival, as regional professional theatres have closed in large numbers nationwide. FEDAPT, a national arts-assistance foundation, was organized in response to the large number of closings of regional professional theatres. FEDAPT identified three main areas of concern: 1) Shrinking funding and mounting debt, 2) An exodus of talent, and 3) Overregulation. FEDAPT reported that they observed all arts organizations attempting to function at a level thirty to fifty percent above the level of available human and financial resources. Their report, "The Quiet Crisis in the Arts," discusses how arts organizations may have to survive by finding a 'new order of business,' something different from the non-profit model that has been the mainstay of American regional theater.¹⁴

A creative field such as theatre should yield no

shortage of creative solutions for improving the prospects of Dallas area theatres. Many ideas have been tried and tested, but many have not. Ideas for audience development will work, but only if the perseverance, resources, and drive to see it through are activated. One solution, which has been recommended by several groups, is increased television media coverage of the arts and upcoming arts events. If local news stations have the power and support to give Dallas five additional sports minutes every night, at least one of the networks might take the initiative to provide five minutes of arts coverage. Another audience development strategy involves the creation of a 'DallArts' card for attendance at various arts events. A 'DallArts' card would look like a credit card and would be presentable at all arts institutions. Use of the 'DallArts' card would identify the holder as a regular arts patron. Discounts might be given for holders of the cards, and a type of punch card might be used for high school students. Arts teachers could give the cards to students who would then get their cards punched throughout the year for attending various events. Teachers could then award extra credit or check assignments through the use of the punch cards.

DallArtDates would involve prepackaged 'arts' dates for couples desiring highly imaginative dates with little effort or planning on their part. Couples could prearrange by telephone to purchase a particular 'DallArtDates' package

advertised in the local newspaper. Couples would board chartered 'DallArtDates' Dart buses at particular Park and Ride Stations to begin their date. From the parking lot, they would be taken to a related mini-arts exhibit at the Dallas Museum of Art, perhaps a costume exhibit, period collection, or related exhibit, where they would be served wine or champagne and hear a mini-report about the exhibit. Next the bus would take them to an exclusive restaurant, followed by their evening at the theatre, and finally, a dessert/coffee/wine stop before being returned to their automobiles. Such ideas are fanciful, and maybe impractical, yet Dallas area theatres must think in fanciful and different directions, if they are to discover creative ways to reach and develop new audiences.

Theatre expenses, like everything else, have skyrocketed. Government cutbacks in social services and the arts have tightened the squeeze on private foundations and corporate donors. In the private sector, the arts will continue to find themselves competing increasingly with programs for drug addicts, people with AIDS, and the handicapped. Arts organizations must eventually be weaned from their fiscal dependence on corporate giving. Learning to stand alone as institutions, and serve the public as the special resources they are, will be a true test of their real creativity and perseverance. Some theatres will necessarily fall along the way. Like all living forms, the evolution of

the theatre includes life and death. But those theatres that find within themselves the ability to reach out and develop new audiences will be the theatres that endure, and their distinctive value will write their artistic survival.

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