

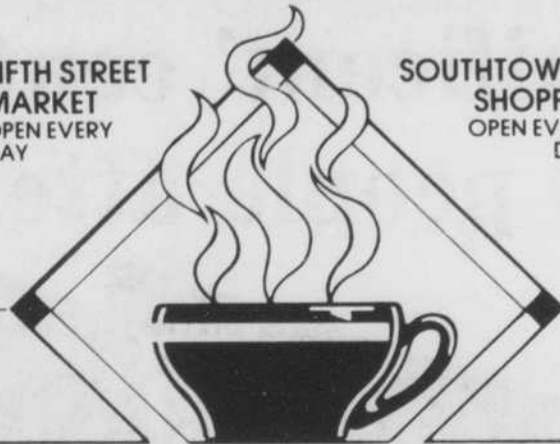
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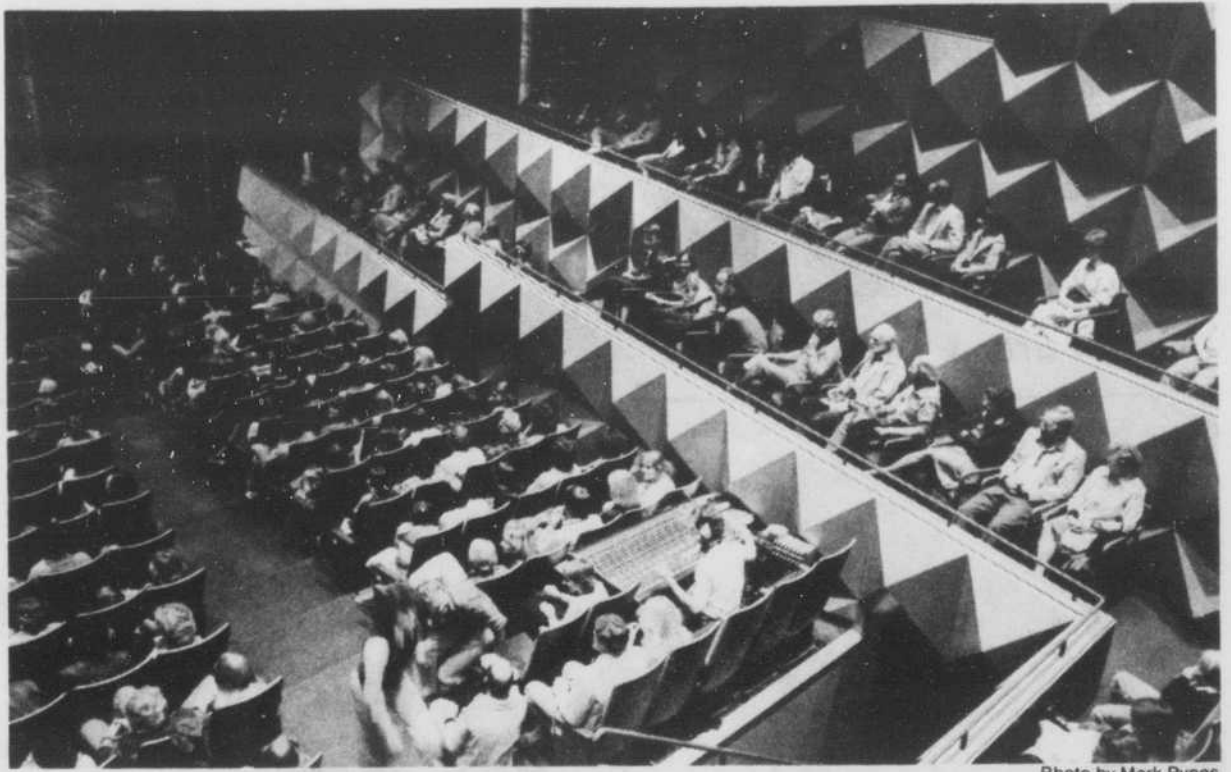


Photo by Mark Pynes

The interior of the Soreng Theatre, which ORT hopes to move into some day.

Lost lease troubles ORT

Theater group vies with Hult Center for money

By Alan Routh

David Lunney, producing director of Eugene's Oregon Repertory Theatre, calls the Hult Center for the Performing Arts an "ambitious project," one intended to benefit all the community. "In a way," he says, "we belong there."

ORT originally planned to move into the center's Soreng Theatre when the group's season ended last year. But it didn't anticipate having its season interrupted by having to move into new facilities.

When ORT's lease for its theater in the Atrium Building expired, the Social Security Hearings and Appeals Office offered to pay 93 cents per foot for the space. ORT was paying 45 cents. When Lunney appealed to the agency to look elsewhere or at least wait until ORT's season was completed, he was ignored.

"The government rolls on forever," Lunney says, somewhat agitated. "You can't talk to those people."

"We were scheduled to move into EPAC at the end of the season," he says, "but our lease in the Atrium was up in mid-season and the government took over our space. We were forced to move prematurely."

"We were all excited about the prospect of working in the Soreng," Lunney says. "For four years I've worked to get ORT eligible for something as grand as the Soreng. And now we can't afford it."

Lunney adds that if ORT doesn't get into the Soreng as planned and take advantage of subsidies provided by the Eugene Arts Foundation and added ticket sales from the larger theater, the local theater company may well eventually go bankrupt.

"We feel our chances of eventually getting into the Soreng are still good," Lunney says, "but not great. And it would be sad, I think, for Eugene to lose us. If we don't get the support and the investment in the future that the move to EPAC represents, we'll disappear, and it will be a while before something or someone takes our place."

Lunney points out that very little drama is available at EPAC — only two plays this year. That dramatic void could be filled by ORT, but not if it goes bankrupt. And with the new competition provided by the Hult Center, it might.

"A lot of arts support we might have seen is now being directed to EPAC," Lunney says. "We must make the leap to the Soreng to see some of that."

'Now we can't afford to get ORT into something as grand as the Soreng.'

"We couldn't shut down until EPAC opened. We already had season ticket subscriptions sold, and our audience was waiting. We couldn't treat the people of Eugene so shabbily as that, you know."

"We remodeled the first floor of the old Eugene Hotel because EPAC wasn't ready, moved in, and continued out the season, all in nine days and at a cost of \$25,000," Lunney says.

Moving into the Hult Center would have been a step up for ORT and might have guaranteed its economic survival, which now remains questionable.

Instead, remodeling the Eugene Hotel cost ORT the revenue it needed to move into the Soreng Theatre.

"We have been building to establish ourselves as a Eugene institution, employing Eugene talent and keeping all the money from our work in Eugene. What are we supposed to do now?"

In a regular season, ORT employs about 250 local actors and production people, produces eight plays and has more than 1,900 season ticket subscriptions held by area residents.

Lunney says he hopes ORT can at least produce Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" in the Soreng this December, if all goes well. But he isn't sure when, if ever, ORT will be able to afford permanent residence in the 500-seat theater.

ORT opens this season October 10 with Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire" at the Eugene Hotel, 222 E. Broadway.

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