

Purpose of the Hult Center still in question

By Doug Nash

Does center emphasize local talent enough?

Eugene's Hult Center for the Performing Arts opened its doors Sept. 24, culminating two decades of effort to promote local arts. But as champagne flowed and dignitaries dealt out congratulations, the center's purpose remained in question.

At issue is the amount of time allotted to imported talent, such as Red Skelton, the New York Philharmonic and Pat Boone, at the expense, some say, of local performers. During the two-month grand opening season, the Eugene Ballet and the Eugene Opera appear only twice each. The Eugene Symphony Orchestra, though making six appearances, is frequently supporting big names like Marilyn Horne and Marvin Hamlisch.

Some groups, like the Oregon Repertory Theatre, have been forced to stay out altogether due to financial problems. Budget-minded students and families may be unable to afford the high prices for the best seats (\$21.25 for Skelton; \$50 for opening night).

In contrast to the center's drab concrete exterior, the interior boasts a lofty lobby with Douglas fir timbers, a sky bridge, and lots of glass. The concert hall mixes the elegance and intimacy of older European halls with state-of-the-art acoustical technology. After viewing the opening, New York Times columnist Harold Schoenberg hailed it "quite possibly the model hall of the future."

The center contains the 2,531-seat Silva Concert Hall and the 515-seat Soreng Theatre.

Art critics are not the only ones excited. The Eugene business community figures on reaping the benefits of the multi-million dollar facility, which consists of the center, a \$4.4 million parking facility, a \$5.2 million conference center and a \$16 million Hilton Hotel.

Businessmen hope all this will draw in millions of dollars more each year from conventioners and tourists. Dick Reynolds, executive director of the Hult Center, estimates tourists alone will generate \$24 million in the community. Luke Bandle, the center's public relations and marketing director, says, "It's probably one of the biggest contributions to economic development the Willamette Valley has seen in years."

Popular support for the center has been long in coming. In 1963, the Metropolitan Civic Club realized the necessity for a permanent home for Eugene's performing groups, which had been appearing in civic halls, make-shift audi-



Photo by Mark Pynes

The Silva Concert Hall opening night. Insert: Luke Bandle, Hult Center marketing director.

toriums and gymnasiums since the city's founding. In 1964 the group, renamed the Lane County Auditorium Association, began the now-famous Bach summer musical productions.

Conservative Eugene merchants, reluctant to open their pocketbooks for what they saw as a luxury, proved a decade-long roadblock. The LCAA financed feasibility studies and acquired about \$2 million in federal aid. Still, support wasn't there. Two bond elections in 1972 and 1973 failed. In 1977, the city took over the battle, and in 1978 taxpayers authorized \$18.5 million for the project.

Catherine Lauris, president of LCAA from 1974-76, blames the early setbacks on an economic recession, controversy over the center's location and an alternative culture movement opposed to anything it considered "bourgeoisie." Sadly, the project would have cost only \$8 million then, she added. The group was finally forced to return the federal aid.

But "20 years is not a long time to get something passed," she contends, noting that it took Minneapolis 72 years of effort.

Lauris maintains the original objectives for the center, saying, "I think the emphasis should be on the unique entertainment we have to offer locally, and this becomes the big drawing card for

the traveler." She cites Ashland's Shakespeare Festival and Eugene's Bach series as examples.

"Of course, the taxpayers have the right to say 'we want this famous TV star,' but you can go anywhere to see these people."

Bandle, formerly president of a Washington, D.C. theatrical agency and public relations company, flatly rejects the notion that the center has become purely rich man's entertainment. Ticket prices are "very comparable," she says, with tickets under \$10 available for every performance. Local entertainers will always have "first choice" and receive sizable breaks in hall rental, she says.

"When they (local performers) are side-by-side with world-class performers in a world-class facility it gives them something to strive for. Because of the facility, there are no limits to how much they can grow and develop," she says.

ORT Producing Director David Lunney blames his organization's financial shortcomings on the very nature of the theater. Theaters have a "much longer performance level" than their musical counterparts, and are unable to invite famous artists for single performances. Through audience expansion and increased fundraising, Lunney hopes ORT will soon be able to move from the Eugene Hotel into the Soreng Theatre.

"Presently, there are no spoken

theaters going on there," he says.

"We didn't cause their financial problems," Bandle says of ORT. For an organization to perform in the Hult Center, she says, it must "spend a lot of time doing what the ballet and opera did — building up their program, improving sets and costumes." ORT has tentatively agreed to do Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" in the Soreng during December.

At the Community Center for the Performing Arts, better known as the WOW Hall, Stage Manager Mikal foresees no competition between his facility and the Hult Center. "We complement one another," he says. "This is the springboard. We give you some exposure."

Performers at the new center will sometimes give the WOW Hall a nostalgic visit. "They all came from the street, and they realize it's people like us who put them on the top. Not so much the Hults (donors Nils and Jewel Hult, for whom the new center is named) they're not the ones who buy the records."

Indeed, Eugene's new home for the arts has already aroused public support for local groups. The Eugene Arts Foundation, set up in 1978 to aid both the new center and the arts community, has received some \$7.45 million in pledges. All but \$150,000, though, has gone to the Hult Center. The donations, says Jim Kuoni, assistant to the director of the EAF, "will reduce the direct operating costs for local groups."

As for the future, Bandle expects no major format changes. "We have to have a balance between what's local, regional and national to satisfy everybody who paid."

Lauris, however, expresses hope that this policy will change. "They just need a shakedown cruise for awhile. We've got something that needs to be filled with local artists."

Lauris, who is currently editor of the University Publishing Office, a member of the ORT board and president of the Lane Regional Arts Council has kept things in clear perspective. While donations flow in, local artists jockey for position, entrepreneurs calculate the dollar signs and Hult Center officials attempt to make the Emerald Empire a showbiz capital, Lauris sits back and sighs.

"You want to really know what the most important thing to happen to this community is?" she asks. "Deady Hall in 1886. Not the performing arts center. It will enrich our lives, and I'm glad it's there, but it's only one facet. The University made this community."

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