

**Theater from A1**

“Our theater is really too small to do any kind of shows inside at this point,” said Opal’s Executive Director Michele Rose. “Social distancing of a crowd just isn’t feasible.”

Members have discussed online options for performances, “but actors feed off of the crowd,” said Rose. “They want that energy.”

At Cottage Theatre, a construction project years in the making has added its own confounding element as the project is not yet finished and still on a deadline.

More than \$400,000 in grants are part of a reimbursement-based commitment.

“If we don’t submit the invoices by next June, we lose the money,” said Goes. “We worked very hard to get commitment secured.”

The nonprofit has been spending its COVID time raising money be-

hind the scenes with the hope of finishing the construction project early 2021 and aims optimistically to open early next summer providing state restrictions allow for it.

The construction project will see 50 new seats added to the theater and, members hope, solidify the theater’s financial future — a goal which has grown to be even more important since the drop in revenue caused by COVID.

Final plans estimate the new house audience capacity to be between 195 and 200 people.

Though the addition of 50 seats may seem a somewhat simple project, much of the room must be reconfigured to accommodate the new arrangement.

Overall, Goes said the theater has raised \$1.8 million for a project that will ultimately cost somewhere around \$2.3 million.

Some of the funding has come from the State



DAMIEN SHERWOOD/COTTAGE GROVE SENTINEL

**Carmen Dowell (center) runs a dance activity for Creative Chaos members on Tuesday.**

of Oregon and from private foundations, “but frankly the largest source of support is individual theater patrons who love the theater and want to see it succeed,” she said.

Goes anticipates the project ultimately being a significant economic boon for Cottage Grove.

“Lots of people go out to dinner before or after a production. It brings people to our area,” she said. “At this point, 70 percent of our audience does not live in Cottage Grove. They come here from somewhere else.”

In the meantime, the theater is hoping for a

few more key grants and other funding to come through so the project can begin.

“We’re looking to raise \$150,000 in individual donations between now and the end of the year,” Goes said. “It’s an ambitious number, but it’s feeling more doable.”

If things go according to plan, the unfinished 2020 show schedule will be pushed into 2021, which would include performances like “Mama Mia!”

“I remain really confident that when it is safe again, people will return to the theater and may

appreciate it even more,” said Goes, who said she was also appreciative of the continuing local support. “[People] have been really patient and faithful during this time. We’ve had surprisingly few requests for refunds. Most people have been happy to roll over their tickets for the future or many have just said, ‘Convert my tickets to a donation.’ It’s really been heartwarming to see that level of support. So I just feel really grateful to be in a community where people value the arts and value having a theater in our town.”

While Cottage Theatre is getting its ducks in a row for construction, Opal Center has made the best of COVID restrictions, resorting to small groups of 10 people or under for social projects and workshops such as Creative Chaos and the Opal Young Performers.

Before COVID hit, the theater received a large anonymous matching grant of \$18,000 meant to be parsed out over three years. An extension has been allowed due to the pandemic and the matching grant will pay for a third of Opal

Center’s expenditures toward its youth and Creative Chaos workshops.

“We are taking advantage of that grant, so we don’t have to charge participants, which makes it very inviting at this point,” said Rose.

Though no shows are scheduled for the rest of 2020, Creative Chaos, a program which offers an expressive platform for people living with disabilities, has continued to offer safe, socially distanced activities for its members.

For the time being, the theater’s financial outlook is positive.

“Opal is in a very good place because we’ve been very fiscally responsible,” said Rose. “We can go for a little while without our ticket sales because we have a small rainy day fund, but that will run out.”

Anticipating this, the theater launched its first-ever fundraising campaign this month.

“Without ticket sales, we do need the community’s support,” Rose said, mentioning that the arts in general are in need of people’s assistance. “Theater is at risk. There are only so many grants out there, especially when it comes to unrestricted grants. Most of the grants are for specifics. ... I’m nervous for our friends in the theater industry — and all the artists that depend on the arts — even our Art Walk artists don’t have venues. So how long can they exist?”

Rose hopes public performances out of Opal Center can resume by late next spring.

“We do have two shows ready to go whenever we can open the doors back up,” she said.

“Our theater-goers are very supportive of Opal and we know that they want us to be here.

“With their support and a few very special donors, we will survive.”

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Published weekly in the Cottage Grove Sentinel and online at cgsentinel.com

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