

Orpheum Owner Steve Needleman:

“Theatre cannot survive without the support of the non-profits.”

By Angela Garcia Combs

“I GOT THE THEATRE BUG IN 1969. I crewed for three years at Beverly Hills High. I am behind the scenes,” says Steve Needleman, an elegant, affable, regular guy and a community-minded real estate investor who so happens to own the gloriously restored Orpheum Theatre on Broadway. That’s Los Angeles’ Broadway, “The largest theatre district in the world,” Needleman claims.

So why does this theatre, arguably the most beautifully restored playhouse in the nation, stand devoid of theatre production? “Realistically, artistically, financially, theatre cannot survive without the support of the non-profits and the community,” says Needleman.

If theatre is a losing proposition, why did this real estate mogul bother to return the now historically designated Orpheum Theatre to its original splendor, and then some? “My father passed away and I had the opportunity to leave something behind, something magnificent. To me, it was worth saving,” says this devoted husband and father of four. Meanwhile his “bread and butter” at the Orpheum are seven to 10 days’ block rentals of the space for “filming, television, comedy, music videos” but, to Needleman’s dismay, no influx of plays in this lovely old theatre. Ironically, the Orpheum is host to the LA



Stage Alliance Ovation Awards for the fifth consecutive year.

The lone play to see production since the Orpheum’s renovation was *Taming of the Shrew* with actress/producer Tamar Fortgang. Needleman donated the space and hosted many “pay what you can” performances. Though the opulent theatre can seat 2,000, they used the Equity contract that limits ticket sales to 99 seats. He explains the high cost of marketing and a contract to run a show in a 2,000 seat theatre needs a sellout audience. Without the support of philanthropic funding, it is prohibitive.

He adds somberly, “People sit at home and watch cable television and everyone’s market shares are dropping. Without government and individual contributions it is very difficult for the arts to survive.”

Needleman adds passionately, “Government supported the arts for generations. That has gone away.

But Needleman is not asking for handouts; in fact he doesn’t believe private investors need or should have government subsidy. But he believes the arts must have it.



On the subject of the revitalization of Downtown LA, he says it can and will happen if the social and cultural priorities are put right. According to Needleman, Downtown will be transformed when the arts are transformed. He notes that the United Artists’ theatres are maintained well but the plumbing, electric and rigging are all from the ‘20s because there is no incentive to upgrade.

Needleman posits that the buildings on Broadway could be put to many community, artistic and commercial uses that would attract sophisticated patrons. He imagines a street where great theatre, music, dining, nightclubs and hotels are buzzing with life, not to mention adding jobs and city revenue. “You want to give government money? Give it to five organizations to put up plays. The Orpheum is already ready. Put the money into non-profits!” ■

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