

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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OF A FINANCIALLY SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL DINNER THEATRE

Abstract approved:

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Different aspects of founding and operating a dinner theatre will be examined and discussed. Information is drawn from published literature on a variety of subjects from management, business, and theatre as well as results taken from a survey questionnaire mailed to a number of dinner theatres currently in operation in the United States. The prototype of dinner theatres will be described based on the compiled research of currently operating facilities. This model, when combined with financial information, will determine what would be the ideal situation in which to operate such an establishment.

A SURVEY OF PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT
OF A FINANCIALLY SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL DINNER THEATRE

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PREFACE

It is often the dream of every enterprising theatre worker to have his own theatre and be able to run things his way. In this volume I have attempted to cater to that whim by supplying much of the information needed and the procedure to follow for the enterprising worker to go out and attempt to establish his own theatre. Many of the sections of advice given herein have been tested under actual "performance conditions" for I, too, have this dream; and, with the help of two very close associates I am attempting to establish my own theatre. In addition to being a compilation of research, this work represents a chronicle of the things I have done, as well as a plan for the things I still must do.

I have attempted to make clear within this study that when anyone undertakes such a monumental task, he is dependent upon a host of variables, any one of which can cause total failure. I don't know if I will be successful, but I do want to warn anyone who might attempt to follow my dangerous course.

I would like to express my appreciation to the following people for their continued support and assistance. Bruce Hyland has provided me with much business advice, and I am indebted to him for his aid in many areas. Rose Whinery assisted greatly in the final preparation of a readable copy of this work. I sincerely appreciate all of her efforts. Thanks go also to the ESU theatre faculty. Both in and outside of classes they have provided aid and encouragement.

Robert E. Miller
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Dinner theatre has recently grown from a novel form of entertainment into a big business investment.¹ As more people attend these entertainment centers which offer an evening of socializing with both food and theatrical productions included in the admission price, more theatres spring up throughout the country.² So, too, more professionals in many fields become interested in this profit-making business venture.

So successful is this new form of suburban theater--a one-stop evening that includes a buffet dinner and a show for \$6 to \$15 a person--it's luring restaurateurs, insurance brokers, lawyers, businessmen and even some professional theater people into opening dinner theaters in shopping centers, converted restaurants,³ former warehouses and remodeled catering halls across the country.

There is a definite need for further study in this field. The following well-researched report will attempt to fulfill this need.

IMPORTANCE, JUSTIFICATION AND BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

Just as most areas of life are cyclical, so too is theatre attendance. After years of waning popularity, the legitimate theatre is now in a period of increased support from the audience.⁴ According

¹Marcia Feldman, "Dinner (and Theater) at Eight," McCall's Magazine, February, 1975, p. 42.

²Feldman, p. 42.

³Feldman, p. 42.

⁴"Living on Laughs--Theater is Back in Business with New Ways, New Writers," U. S. News & World Report, August 11, 1975, p. 45.

to a 1975 issue of U. S. News & World Report,

After years of famine, receipts for ticket sales on Broadway rose to 57 million dollars in the 1974-75 season--nearly 25 per cent higher than the previous year. . . . Elsewhere in the country, many theaters reported similar growth. The Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles finished the season with its best receipts in history. The Alley Theater in Houston was sold out night after night.

Estimates are that 50 million tickets were purchased to live performances in the U. S. in the 12 months ended June 30, 1975. The total is believed to be an all-time record.⁵

Dinner theatre is also following this trend of expansion. As a valuable business form it has been increasing and is currently supplying many opportunities for theatre personnel. According to a recent issue of Show Business, "Dinner theatre has become a viable outlet for actors, directors, technicians and designers, as well as a popular mode of entertainment for the public en masse."⁶ More actors are currently employed by such establishments than by Broadway theatres.⁷

Why has dinner theatre become such a suddenly popular form? One explanation is its tendency to be a profit-making investment.

What makes dinner theater so successful is that, unlike repertory theaters, they are enormously lucrative. Where most repertory theaters can't cover production costs (which can run as high as \$38,000 a week) even if they sell every seat every night, a dinner theater can break even by selling only about two thirds of its seats. That's because dinner theaters, which can sell wine and liquor⁸ and are open for lunch, are not solely dependent on ticket sales.

Dinner theatres may fill the requirements of providing popular entertainment at moderate costs and can be lucrative business ventures, but can they hold any true merit as far as artistic production values

⁵"Living on Laughs," p. 45.

⁶Doug Cole, "Dinner Theatre Round-Up," Show Business [New York], August 25, 1977, p. 1, cols. 4-5.

⁷Feldman, p. 42.

⁸Feldman, p. 42.

allow? Many factors must be considered in the answer to this question.

Obviously the artistic values of any production are dependent on the director, producer, designers, staff and actors. In this respect it is safe to assume that dinner theatres can have as much artistic merit as other theatre organizations despite human limitations. There are poor companies and good companies dependent upon their bad and good artistic decisions.

Another factor influencing artistic ability is the physical theatre itself with its technical facilities. Dinner theatres vary technically as much as other types of theatres. Many have elaborate facilities opening unlimited possibilities to the creative designer.⁹ Others have limited facilities which might tend to hamper artistic design.¹⁰ However, as has often been proven, a theatre with technical limitations can produce just as valid artistic work as the most elaborate theatre when the right decisions are made.

The final and most important condition for this type of theatre is the audience influence upon the artistic production values. With dinner theatres the audience sets up certain limitations which do not necessarily apply to other theatres. Since the audience is attending for entertainment and pleasure, the production must provide entertainment and pleasure. Theatre has often in the past demonstrated that entertainment can also be instructional, creative and artistic, but in this case the basic aim must be to entertain. In addition to considering this basic reason for attending, the amounts of food and alcohol consumed must also be considered. Many theatrical offerings may be

⁹Cole, pp. 3, 10, and 31.

¹⁰Cole, pp. 3, 10, and 31.

acceptable in a normal theatre, but would not be acceptable in a theatre at which the patrons have just eaten a full meal and perhaps are still in the process of finishing their drinks. As Marcia Feldman stated in her article for McCall's Magazine, "But don't expect to catch King Lear or Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf at your local theater restaurant. Proprietors aren't about to risk giving audiences indigestion."¹¹

For this reason most dinner theatres offer bills mainly consisting of light comedies and musicals. Only rarely can one be found that will offer anything as serious as The Lion in Winter by James Goldman which deals with the historical English royalty of Henry VIII and Eleanor of Aquitaine.¹² Even so, a great number of comedies and musicals are worthy of production. Comedy in itself takes considerable talent to perform well and should not be thought unworthy of serious consideration.¹³ Even though they are rare, there are a few dinner theatres producing shows of a somewhat more serious nature such as Dial M for Murder by Frederick Knott, a melodramatic murder mystery scheduled for the coming year's season at the Naples Dinner Theatre in Naples, Florida; Cabaret by Joe Masteroff, John Kander and Fred Ebb, a musical of decadent, pre-World War II Germany, at the Northstage Theatre Restaurant in Glen

¹¹Feldman, p. 42

¹²Cole, pp. 3, 10, and 31. A typical list of titles being presented by many dinner theatres in the forthcoming season include such popular fare as: Guys and Dolls; I Do! I Do!; The Sound of Music; Mary, Mary; The Seven Year Itch; Cactus Flower; Harvey; See How They Run; Charley's Aunt; Camelot; The Sunshine Boys; You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown; Funny Girl; California Suite; Godspell; The Drunkard; Barefoot in the Park; Music Man; My Three Angels; Good News; She Loves Me; The Odd Couple; and Brigadoon.

¹³Henning Nelms, Play Production (3d ed.; 1958; rpt. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1968), p. 159.

Cove, L. I., New York; and The Lion in Winter at the Beverly Dinner Theatre in Jefferson, Louisiana.¹⁴

As an artistic method of expression dinner theatre can be as valid as any other form of theatre, taking into consideration its limitations. It can be a profit-making business venture when produced on the professional level. Dinner theatres provide job opportunities for actors, directors, technicians, designers and other professionals in the theatrical field. Dinner theatres are increasing in popularity along with other theatres. This field certainly warrants further study.

Preliminary research revealed appallingly little information written about this popular theatrical form. A review of the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature turned up only three articles written specifically about dinner theatre in the past seven years. A search through the card catalog of the William Allen White Library as well as Theatre Books in Print by A. E. Santaniello showed no book in print covering this specialized area. Further reading including American Dissertations on the Drama and the Theatre by Fredric M. Litto revealed nothing about this particular topic. However, extensive works on restaurants and theatre in general may apply in many cases to dinner theatre as well. The most helpful source was Theatre Management in America by Stephen Langley. However, since there is little written matter covering this topic, a study designed to explore such an area and in particular the ways and means of establishing such a theatre is needed.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

¹⁴Cole, pp. 3, 10, and 31.

Based on the lack of previously written material on this topic, this research report was written to provide information concerning dinner theatres. The research report is a compilation of information outlining the procedure that can be followed to best facilitate the establishment of a financially successful dinner theatre. Research was drawn from published material covering topics including dinner theatre, theatre management, and restaurant management, and from questionnaires which were mailed to a sampling of theatres in operation throughout the United States.

Definition of Terms

To set specific limitations to this general statement of the problem certain terms need to be further defined.

Establishment. This report mainly focuses on the methods of bringing a dinner theatre into a community. Emphasis is placed on the choice of community and what elements in it tend to make such a venture succeed. Also of major consideration is the opening budget, facilities, and the approach needed to assure financial success.

Financially successful. This study has determined which existing theatres are financially successful by an analysis of responses given to certain items on completed questionnaires. The most important questions were: "How many years has your theatre been in operation? What are your future plans? What percentage of the seating capacity do you normally sell?", and "In what year after your theatre opened did it first show a profit?" A successful dinner theatre was determined as one which sells 50 percent of its house during a typical night of a successful show and which indicated it first showed a profit during its first three years of operation.

Dinner theatre. "A dinner theatre is defined by Equity as one that presents productions for no less than two weeks each, on a year-round basis, in a room where both the dinner and the show occur and the price of admission includes both."¹⁵ This definition also applies to this report.

Limitations of the Study

This study has already been limited by the definition of the terms being used. A further limitation is the investigation of only professional theatres. There are many types of dinner theatres in existence. Many of them are nonprofit and community organizations. However, this report is primarily concerned with those that are profit-making organizations. As a professional organization, a dinner theatre has the option of hiring Actors' Equity Association members, resident and stock actors, or of bringing in package shows which may be largely composed of big-name celebrities. In addition to either option, a professional organization may also use community, apprentice and other nonprofessional actors and staff in compliance with Actors' Equity Association regulations.¹⁶ Furthermore, a professional organization must meet requirements which may not necessarily concern the nonprofit organization, such as the necessity of paying salaries not found in an amateur theatre. Most of the information contained in this report will also easily adapt to the nonprofessional theatre as well.

Since the written source material is somewhat scant, most of the information was gathered by questionnaires. Of course, another limita-

¹⁵Stephen Langley, Theatre Management in America (New York: Drama Book Specialists/Publishers, 1974), pp. 103-104.

¹⁶Langley, pp. 103-104.

tion becomes obvious when this is considered. Many items were omitted from the questionnaire in order to facilitate the ease of responding. However, the items of most immediate concern were covered.

The sample questionnaire appears in Appendix B. The questionnaire was designed by the author with the assistance of members of the theatre faculty of Emporia State University and with the help of a graduate student in the field of business administration who has had experience in marketing research. Appendix D contains the master listing of all dinner theatres in operation in the United States. Of these 143 theatres, a geographically stratified sampling of 100 theatres were contacted by mail. Of these 100 theatres, fourteen responded by filling out the questionnaire. The validity of the information gained is thus dependent upon these limitations of the size of the sample and the design of the questionnaire. However, the fourteen responding theatres do constitute a valid survey of all dinner theatres because of the random variety of theatres they represent. The respondents are an equally mixed group of Equity and non-Equity theatres located throughout the United States, including such cities as Golden, Colorado; Chanhassen, Minnesota; Peoria, Illinois; Nashville, Tennessee; Elmsford, New York; and Sarasota, Florida. A list of the responding theatres is in Appendix C.

In addition to other sources, the author attended five dinner theatres in the mid-west region. Specific references to the methods of operation in the theatres attended are made. Distinctions are drawn between personal experience and research obtained by questionnaires and published material.

PROCEDURE

This research project is organized according to the steps taken by this writer in examining cities which have the potential to support a dinner theatre. Step one consists of choosing the specific location for the theatre. Several mid-western cities containing existing dinner theatres were investigated, the results appearing in Table 1 of Appendix A. In addition to these cities, others not containing dinner theatres, but having the potential to support them were also researched. Lincoln, Nebraska, is used as a prime example of such a potential theatre supporting city.

The second step is a detailed survey of the facilities which can be opened. This includes the physical style of the theatre, from the overall building structure to the type of stage used.

Step three of the investigation centers on an examination of the various possible methods of operating such establishments. Most of the information contained in this study is drawn from the responses of existing dinner theatres to the questionnaire.

The fourth and final step is an investigation of the finances of a typical dinner theatre. Budgets and initial costs are suggested with methods of controlling costs given. A more detailed outline for the construction of this work is given in the table of contents.

Chapter 2

LOCATION AND ESTABLISHMENT

In the establishment of a professional theatre perhaps the most important factor is finding the location to establish.

Ideally, each producer and artistic director should be able to select the community where he feels his theatre has the best chance to thrive, both economically and artistically. While the choice of location may be limited by circumstances, the brave people who search out performance places might often come closer to their ideal theatre if they searched a little longer and, perhaps, a little further a-field. . . . When assessing a potential theatre site--the community, the audience potential, the building itself--the advice of professional consultants is often helpful in gathering information.¹⁷

When searching for this ideal community in which to establish a theatre, one must consider many factors in addition to the ones mentioned in the above quote from Theatre Management by Stephen Langley. These aspects and factors are the basis for this chapter. A point of departure into this lengthy area of investigation is the community itself.

THE COMMUNITY

If a producer has virtually unlimited funds and time in which to search for the ideal community, he would be best advised to follow the example set by Sir Tyrone Guthrie. Along with Peter Zeisler and Oliver Rea, Guthrie undertook a methodical search for the optimum city in which to establish their professional repertory company. This search occupied

¹⁷Langley, p. 34

several years time and a small fortune in expenses before finally resulting in the opening of the Guthrie Theatre in 1963 and in the establishing of the Minnesota Theatre Company.¹⁸ However such a search, as fruitful as it may be in end results, is not always practical. If the producer-to-be is eager for more immediate results, he can obtain somewhat satisfactory ones by examining selected statistics, making specific inquiries, and conducting specialized research.

Size

As a contributing factor to the ideal community, size can be one of the paramount concerns. The city must be large enough to provide an audience that will attend the facility, providing income. If an overly small community is selected, the theatre-going audience might attend the productions early during the runs, and possibly leave empty houses for the latter part of any given run, while waiting for the next production. This situation would cause huge production expenses which cannot be recouped by ticket sales alone. In like manner an overly large city may cause problems with publicizing and getting a reputation started for the theatre when there are any number of other entertainment facilities and possibly other dinner theatres for the public to attend. Of the theatres responding to the questionnaires mailed, sizes of located communities were quite mixed. The largest community hosting a theatre was Nashville, Tennessee with a 1970 population of 447,877.¹⁹ The smallest host city

¹⁸Bradley G. Morison and Kay Fliehr, In Search of an Audience (New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1968), p. 4.

¹⁹"Nashville," Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia (1975) XVII, 122.

was more difficult to determine. Several theatres were located in cities so small their populations did not show up as separate statistics in census reports, however, all of these small cities were located in relatively close (within fifty miles) proximity to larger cities, such as the theatre in Columbia, Maryland, near Baltimore; or the theatre in Chanhassen, Minnesota, near Minneapolis-St. Paul.²⁰ However, the theatre located in the smallest community was one in Manassas, Virginia, with a population of 9,164.²¹ Even this smaller community is within easy distance of Alexandria and Washington, D. C.²²

Statistics show that only about three percent of any given population will attend theatre.²³ For a professional theatre to be successful it must be located in a community where three percent of an entire population can successfully fill the house to the theatre's economic necessity. Dinner theatres can be classified into four groups depending on their seating capacities: petite 0 to 229, small 230 to 349, medium 350 to 549, and large 550 to 900.²⁴ Responding theatres ranged from small and petite seating 120 to large seating 550. An average seating capacity is approximately 288. Selling two-thirds of the house capacity would probably be necessary for financial success.²⁵ With an estimated

²⁰Funk & Wagnalls Hammond World Atlas (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, Inc., 1975), p. 86.

²¹"Manassas," Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia (1975) XV, 450.

²²Funk & Wagnalls Hammond World Atlas, p. 108.

²³Langley, p. 35.

²⁴Actors' Equity Association, Agreement and Rules Governing Employment in Dinner Theatres, Effective November 3, 1975, Terminates February 4, 1979, (New York: Actors' Equity Association), p. 11.

²⁵Feldman, p. 42.

number of performances being thirty per production, the community would need to be approximately 190,000. Of course, these calculations are based on averages which were obtained from theatres ranging from large to small and having a wide range of possible performances of each production.²⁶ If the theatre has a smaller seating capacity and runs shows for a shorter duration, it could be quite successful in a smaller community. Other factors can also influence these statistics. For example, the community may have more than three percent of its population who are theatre-goers. Of course, this may depend to a great extent on many factors involving the composition of the community.

It is safe to assume that for a professional theatre to survive, the community must be of sufficient population to provide a large clientele. Based on the above calculations, a population of approximately 190,000 or more is indicated for financial success.

In the next two sections some of the factors which tend to increase the percentage of theatre-going public are examined.

Economy

Since the divergence of theatre from religion in Greece people have looked upon theatre as a luxury rather than a necessity. Despite the cultural enrichment and communal benefits arising from any art form, man does not need to attend theatre in order to survive. Theatre has become the pastime of the affluent in many cases. The economy of the community, therefore, may have a great influence on the success or failure of a professional establishment. Nonprofit organizations may not be as seriously dependent upon income; however, the community economic sit-

²⁶Refer to Appendix B for results of the survey.

uation must still be considered.

Another yardstick for predicting the success of a theatre is to determine whether potential playgoers can easily afford the price of admission. What is the average income in the area? How much are people currently spending for live entertainment? How much can they afford to spend? Can group ticket sales be anticipated from large businesses, industries, schools and organizations? Has there been growth or decline in the general economy of the area over the past decade or so.²⁷

These are only a few of the many questions to be asked when researching the economy of a proposed community. In order to complete this research several sources can be checked. The United States Census Reports contain a storehouse of similar economic statistics on various cities.

Specific information is easier to find if the city is of fairly large size. This is already a prerequisite from the previous section on community selection, so statistical information is available in any well-stocked library. Once the specific city or cities are determined, more detailed information may be obtained from the city itself. Places to check which may be full of information include the local tax assessor's office, interviews with commerce officials, managers of local movie theatres and restaurants, and other businessmen.²⁸

Several larger mid-western cities containing dinner theatres were examined to investigate median incomes. The results of this examination appear in Table 1 of Appendix A. This table also gives a cross-reference of other aspects, some of which might influence theatre attendance, and will be discussed in later sections within this chapter. From the results of Table 1 the average median income of these larger mid-western, theatre supporting cities is \$9,811.57. This takes in quite a range of incomes with the lowest (\$8,974) median belonging to Colorado Springs.

²⁷Langley, p. 38.

²⁸Langley, p. 38.

Even with this somewhat low median income this city supports a dinner theatre.

Types of industries and jobs in the city as well as a large number of other factors must also be taken into account when examining the economy, for these factors have a direct influence upon the economy. In addition to financial matters, these factors will also have an influence on the composition of the populace and may be determinant factors in the previously quoted three percent figure.

Culture

Culture is an all inclusive term for many aspects of the population. Most of these things deal with sociological and background make-up of the individuals concerned. There are certain cultural traits in a community that the prospective producer should seek.

Religious attitudes. The religious standard of a community may have some influence on a proposed theatre. Although it will rarely dictate prerequisites for theatre as religion has in the distant past (such as religious oppressions of theatre),²⁹ even in today's enlightened age religion may strongly influence people and their attitudes. Although in larger communities religion has much less influence than in small towns; however, it still cannot be discounted.

A producer will rarely have to ask if he can present theatrical productions because of religious influences in a community as compared to asking what kind of productions he should present. Many strong fundamentalist denominations forbid such activities as drinking and dancing.

²⁹Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1968), p. 82.

These attitudes can influence having a bar in the theatre or the presentation of lavish musicals requiring extensive choreography. However, the larger congregations in larger cities may frequently overlook these strict interpretations for entertainment's sake.³⁰

If a producer is establishing a theatre in a predominantly single-denominational area, it would be wise for him to research the religious beliefs and prohibitions of this denomination to avoid stepping on toes and making enemies before he can even begin to build his reputation and clientele. Most religious groups will accept what could be called "wholesome, family entertainment." However, the producer will be seriously limiting his own creativity if he produces nothing but this type of fare for every performance.

Ethnic backgrounds. In the United States, often referred to as the "great melting pot," ethnic backgrounds once mattered little unless one examined certain inner city areas and ethnic bottle-necks such as Chinatown, Little Italy, or Harlem. Now, America seems to be moving into a period when more of her citizens are interested in their heritage and are proud of their ethnic backgrounds.³¹ Just as in dealing with religious attitudes, producers do not seek to engender bad feelings because of a carelessly chosen production which might be culturally offensive to certain patrons.

One large ethnic difference which makes itself obvious from the start is the question of race. While statistics tend to prove most

³⁰Brooks Hayes and John E. Steely, The Baptist Way of Life (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 76.

³¹Michael Novak, The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), p. xvi.

theatre-goers are in the majority from white, middle or upper class groups, this does not mean all theatre patrons fit into these patterns.³² So too, if a producer presents productions catering only to one stereotyped group, the season will soon tend to become stale and bigoted. Even in a town where bigoted productions would be accepted or even encouraged, such constant productions would give the theatre a bad reputation in other towns and help give the town a bad reputation throughout the nation. The producer must cater to his audience if he wishes to be successful, but he must be aware of differences within his audience members and not cater to a stereotype which may be inaccurate.

Education. According to Stephen Langley, "Excluding campus audiences, most theatregoers are drawn from white, middle and higher income categories, tend to be college graduates, hold professional or executive positions and are middle-aged or older."³³ Theatre has often been considered the art and entertainment of the upper class and the well-educated. Dinner theatre working as a total entertainment concept will work best if it tends to offer stimulating productions which provide intellectual challenge for its audience without becoming too "high-brow" to be entertaining. A dinner theatre would not be successful if it offered only "entertainment for the groundlings" in the environment of "a cheap saloon." The producer has to walk many fine lines in planning for his public. He does not want his theatre to be so designed for the intellectual and upper class as to make anyone less than a "jet-setter" feel out of place, nor does he wish to provide less than acceptable standards of décor and production for his upper class and intel-

³²Langley, p. 35.

³³Langley, p. 35.

lectual patrons. Choices must be made carefully after close examination of the proposed theatre clientele available.

Sophistication. This term is somewhat ambiguous. In relation to the theatre audience the definition provided by Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language can be best applied. ". . . 2. worldly wise; not naive. 3. intellectual or appeal to the intellect; perceptive; knowledgeable; subtle."³⁴ Sophistication is really a characteristic of the audience which is tied up with a great many other characteristics, perhaps most notably their education, economic and social backgrounds. The higher any of these three characteristics are, the more likely a person is thought to be considered sophisticated. Often times worldly-wise and not naive may mean not easily shocked and appalled by what may be seen presented on stage. The higher the level of sophistication in the audience, the more chance the producer may have to try daring experimental or otherwise risqué productions. However, this is an area which may be difficult to determine.

Recreation. Since dinner theatre may be considered entertainment as well as art, it may fall into the category of recreation, or something done without direct purpose of sustaining the necessities of life. At the present, competition from other theatres will not be considered. Competition from other forms of entertainment, however, may pose a problem for the producer who is trying to get his new establishment off the ground.

The first item to consider is recreation which may fall into the

³⁴Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1968).

theatre-arts-entertainment category. When researching the prospective community, the producer should check with local movie theatres and restaurants about attendance. Chances are if these facilities are well attended, there may be an audience for a theatre also. Other similar recreations may include community theatre, academic theatre (college, university, high school); local cultural arts events such as ballets, symphonies and opera presentations; touring companies presenting any theatre or cultural programs, and so forth. Cultural arts events should be taken into consideration when planning and scheduling to allow patrons as well as staff members to attend these related activities.

Recreation may also take into account such diversionary pastimes as general sports and entertainment. Attendance at local bars and night clubs may be some indication of the community's desire for entertainment and diversion, although the crowd that frequents the local "beer joints" may not be the type of affluent clientele a theatre would seek. Football, baseball and basketball fans may not be the standard theatre-going crowd either, but an interest in sports shows some willingness to leave the home environment behind and to attend outside events.

Whereas the football, baseball, basketball crowd may not be the standard theatre-going public, some sports do tend to be principally patronized by an affluent crowd. Golf is often thought to be the sport of the elite. Members of country clubs would make prime targets for a membership drive for a local theatre. Tennis and skiing have in the past often been associated with the upper class; however, a current interest in these sports has tended to break these class distinctions.³⁵

³⁵John Underwood, "Now Everyone Has the Bug," Sports Illustrated, November 11, 1974, p. 95.

Arts orientation. This has been mentioned briefly in the preceding section. A community with strong cultural and art interests will be the best one for housing a professional theatre. Generally speaking, a person interested in the arts will not limit himself or herself to only one artistic field. Thus, if there is a strong following of opera and ballet in a community, chances are these fans will be interested in legitimate theatre as well.³⁶ For a producer to find this information he may contact different sources. The place to start is with community and state arts councils. In the city of Lincoln, Nebraska, alone there are at least six different organizations and councils for the promotion of the arts within the community.

Attendance figures should be obtained for previously mentioned events such as ballets, operas, exhibitions, symphonies, and any theatre presentations in the area including academic theatre. Chances are, the larger the more "sophisticated" the community, the better will be the arts orientation. It has been the experience of this author in a small, rural community that arts orientation was extremely poor while sports attendance was extremely high. This example, however, was only one isolated case and may not be used as a criterion of other small or rural communities.

Geography

Another important factor in the location of the theatre is the location of the theatre. This consideration may appear redundant, but

³⁶Langley, p. 36.

³⁷Based on personal correspondence between Mr. David E. Wolvin, Office of Industrial Development, Lincoln Chamber of Commerce, and the writer, February 27, 1978.

the reference is to the actual physical geography of the community within which the establishment is located. The greatest number of existing dinner theatres are located in the eastern sector of the United States.³⁸ In Appendix D can be seen the list of dinner theatres compiled by combining the Leo Shull publication, "Dinner Theatres," and "Dinner Theatre List 1977" printed by Actors' Equity Association. Also in this appendix is a regional breakdown map of the United States showing the number of dinner theatres in each region. The region containing the most dinner theatres is the area of the United States bordering the south Atlantic seacoast. The second greatest concentration is the mid-Atlantic region, while the area bordering the Great Lakes and containing Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin comes third. The areas of least concentration are the Pacific coast including Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington, and the eastern south central region containing Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

These statistics ought to be considered when choosing a location. The possibility does exist that the east coast area is already over-populated with such establishments and would not be a good choice in locating a new theatre restaurant because of too much competition. Competition will be considered in the next section. However, this factor of strong concentration may also indicate that there is a great desire in the east coast for such theatres and that there is a population in this region that will attend and patronize such places. After all, the eastern sector of the United States is the area with the densest popu-

³⁸"Dinner Theatres," (New York: Leo Shull Publications, n. d.), pp. 3-70.

lation.³⁹ More people may mean more potential audience members.

Using reverse logic from that used in the preceding paragraph, one may decide to locate on the Pacific coast. It does have the smallest number of dinner theatres in comparison to other sections. This may mean that the area is wide open for just such establishments, having little competition. Although, one may ask why the area is so underpopulated with dinner theatres. Perhaps there is no real interest or desire for them as there may be other forms of entertainment and culture which fill their needs. These are questions which the producer must ask and investigate before settling on his location.

Competition

Competition may arise from many other sources in this field. Competition also may come from other restaurants in the city or general area. It may come from other theatres, or it may come from other cultural and entertainment events and establishments. However, in many cases competition can be a beneficial factor as far as theatre is concerned.

Contrary to general opinion, competition in the performing arts is a healthy thing provided, of course, that it does not involve an overly frequent duplication of similar entertainment or programming. Theatregoing is a habit. It can be cultivated by amateur or community theatres and applied to professional theatregoing. The opposite may also be true, although high quality entertainment tends to encourage audiences to demand more of the same high standards. But theatregoing is not a habit that people acquire quickly. Long and continuing availability of theatre in a given area is desirable. Without question, the new theatre that locates itself in a community already accustomed to playgoing has a more ready audience potential than others: it is easier to share an audience than to create a new one from scratch.⁴⁰

³⁹Funk & Wagnalls Hammond World Atlas, p. 62.

⁴⁰Langley, p. 36.

Mr. Langley points out some strong advantages to a healthy amount of theatrical competition. He does, however, go on to say that duplication of the same production within the same season or in a very close season by differing theatres can be an unwise decision. The producer does not have to worry overly much about the question, "Is there already a theatre operating in the community?", but rather "What has the theatre operating in the community already presented?"

Transportation

Transportation in the area under examination must be a key issue for the simple reason that one must have a way of getting the audience to the theatre. The first question to consider is "Are the streets and roads leading to the theatre in good condition, well traveled and easy to find?" Theatres located in larger cities may not have much of a problem with transportation since they may be serviced in the city by buses, subways, and trains. This is an advantage for the audience member who does not drive his own vehicle or does not wish to drive and find a parking space.

Occasionally some theatres may be placed in hard to find locations which are considered only for certain other advantages. An example might be any theatre that would be located "off the beaten path," but in a resort area such as the mountains. The tourist trade drawn by the resort area may offset the otherwise hard-to-find location of the theatre.

The producer should check with federal, state and local governmental agencies to find out the regulations covering the posting of directional markers and signs to facilitate locating the theatre by the public. Special buses may be run by the theatre itself to transport

patrons and customers from pre-arranged bus stops. This service of course, may depend on need and financial ability.

Another consideration of transportation is the ability of the theatre to be serviced by others. Many theatres do not have adequate room for construction and storage of scenery and, thus, have to have their scenery trucked from another location to the theatre. The streets adjoining the theatre should be able to accommodate trucks. Also various food items will have to be delivered on a regular basis for the operation of the restaurant. These factors must be considered when choosing the location. Some states have laws prohibiting trucking on Sundays, after dark, or on certain streets within the city.⁴¹ These laws should be investigated before final decisions are made.

Surrounding Communities

Much of the revenue for a theatre restaurant may come from tourist trade or other patronage from outside of standard community audiences. For this reason consideration should be given to the general surrounding area of the proposed community. The close proximity of communities may be one reason for the popularity of dinner theatres on the east coast. In this highly populated region virtually every city is surrounded by any number of smaller communities.⁴² Suburbs provide potential theatre audiences for almost every city of substantial size.

People in outlying communities surrounding a larger city often do not have a large number of entertainment options within their own communities because of the options available in the nearby "parent" city. They are the people who would welcome the opening of a new

⁴¹Langley, p. 36.

⁴²Funk & Wagnalls Atlas, p. 62

entertainment facility to attend. Special publicity campaigns aimed directly at these communities could produce very satisfying returns. The city of Lincoln, Nebraska, alone draws from a twelve county surrounding area for shopping and entertainment.⁴³

Location Within the Community

The location of the theatre within the community if improperly chosen can many times assure its failure faster than many other factors. Many items should be considered before choosing the building site. Among these are crime statistics of the neighborhood, parking facilities in the area, lighting of streets and sidewalks at night, upkeep on traffic ways, zoning of the area for business, taxes of property in the area, amount of traffic on the streets passing the theatre, types of business located in the area, previous tenants of the proposed building (if applicable), and condition of buildings and businesses in the area. Many of these items can be found through city offices, real estate agents, etc. One hazard does present itself, however, in checking these various factors. If a real estate agent has a prospective site for sale, anything he or she says concerning the favorability of the location should be cross-checked with other sources as to the reliability of such statements. Real estate agents have a vested interest in selling any property.⁴⁴

In an area zoned for business and commerce, such as a downtown sector, theatres may have the best police protection, adequate lighting

⁴³Statement by Sally Scott and Madonna Kardell, representatives of Century Real Estate of Lincoln, in a personal interview, Lincoln, Nebraska, March 12, 1978.

⁴⁴The author's personal experience.

and parking and many other advantages, but in many larger cities the downtown areas are slowly falling into disrepair as businesses tend to move to suburban shopping centers deserting the inner city. This may be a factor to consider, although in many cities the trend is beginning to reverse itself. Advantages may be listed for locating in a primarily residential area, but proper zoning for the type of business, trucking and other things of this nature may prohibit this. The trend of businesses moving into new shopping complexes may also be a good idea for theatre; however, shopping centers can also be a problem with high rentals and other possible restrictions.

If the city is growing, and it should be if any hopes of success are entertained, it is a good idea to find which areas are growing the fastest and with the more prosperous businesses and homes. This may indicate a potential audience growth. Again using Lincoln, Nebraska, as an example, growth in this city tends to be to the south and east with more prosperous residential communities being established. To the north and west the city has tended to stagnate since these areas are devoted primarily to industrial businesses.⁴⁵

On the questionnaire sent to existing theatres throughout the country the question was asked as to whether the theatre was located in residential, rural or urban districts of the community. Of the total responding theatres, 41.6 percent were located in extremely urban districts, 33.3 percent in urban-residential, 8.3 percent in residential districts, 33.3 percent in residential-rural and none in extremely rural districts. This supports the statement made earlier about the

⁴⁵David E. Wolvin, Office of Industrial Development, Lincoln Chamber of Commerce, in a telephone interview, Lincoln, Nebraska, March 13, 1978.

advantages of establishing in a downtown sector as the largest number of theatres have done just this.

In summation, many factors must be considered when deciding upon a city or community in which to establish a professional dinner theatre. Size, economy, culture, geography, competition, transportation, surrounding communities and the location within the community are all items that must be investigated. Each item raises a number of questions which need to be answered by the potentially successful producer. Many of these answers can be found only by direct investigations of the proposed city and building sites. This author has found the majority of city representatives, members of the chambers of commerce, real estate agents, and city officials to be very willing to discuss their cities in light of their abilities to support new businesses and cultural arts projects. However, if the representative has something to gain, such as a real estate agent with the possibility of a very large sale, much of what he or she may say should be cross-checked with others.

ACQUIRING THE BUILDING

Once the city has been selected and even the area of the community has been chosen, the next step for the would-be producer is to find a building which will house the theatre. This again involves a long process of questioning and decision making based upon many differing factors. In this section some of these questions are examined.

Use of an Already Existing Theatre

In this section the assumption is made that a building exists which was designed as or most recently used as a theatre, whether legitimate or motion picture, which may be renovated and adapted for use as a

dinner theatre. This may seem to be an ideal situation, finding a theatre already constructed for use; however, several points of consideration arise. In the first place, why is the theatre able to be used by a new organization? If it has been vacant, for what reason did it cease to function as a theatre? If it has been used and is being sold or leased by the previous owner, why is this being done? It is quite possible that the building may have serious problems in being used as a theatre, either structurally or possibly in location. If the previous tenant or owner operated an unsuccessful theatre, one might wonder why it did not succeed. If the previous owner operated a very successful theatre, one might wonder why it is being closed or relocated if it is doing so well.

Not all of these questions need have disappointing answers. It is quite possible that the previous owner was incompetent when it came to theatre management, that he decided to move to what he may have considered a better location. Any number of other factors which may not significantly harm the possible audience attraction of the proposed building may exist. Answers to these questions can be acquired by asking discreet questions of individuals concerned. A listing agent for the building may provide some information although it may be quite guarded. The owner or previous tenant may be the person most willing to enumerate the failings or advantages of the establishment. Tax assessors, insurance agents, and building inspectors should be consulted. Local businessmen in the area may also provide quite useful information.

If the building is suitable despite the above listed reservations, then the structure itself should be examined. For the possibility of converting the theatre into a functioning theatre restaurant, the soundness of the physical structure should be examined by a competent

architect or building inspector. The United States is literally sprinkled with a generous helping of old vaudeville houses which have since been converted into other businesses or possibly into motion picture establishments. If this is the case the theatre may have adequate backstage area and stage area for use again as a legitimate theatre. The only problem with this arrangement is the problem of converting a theatre into a functioning theatre restaurant. A kitchen area is a necessity, something an old vaudeville house or any other theatre may not have. Also, tables and chairs are needed in place of rows of seats or else a separate dining area is needed. Very few dinner theatres are designed as proscenium theatres (13 percent of the responding theatres) due to sightline and space problems. Very few old vaudeville houses were designed as anything but proscenium theatres. Of course, all of these conversion factors will depend upon the producer's ideas and desires as to the type of theatre he plans to develop.

Chances seem to be against the possibility of locating an existing theatre. Of the responding theatres, only 25 percent said that they were housed in an existing theatre which was adapted to their use. Most dinner theatre producers have either decided against existing theatres because of the many problems in conversion or else there is truly a lack of existing theatres in the market.

Renovation of an Unused Building

Theatre can take place anywhere from elaborate Broadway structures involving tons of theatrical machinery to public streets roped off for an evening's entertainment. If a theatre building is not available to the novice producer he should not despair, but simply look for any other building which might suit his purposes. Many such buildings exist

in any given city. One needs only time, money and imagination to convert such a place into a theatre restaurant.

Certain requirements become immediately obvious for a structure to be suitable as a dinner theatre. On the exterior should be adequate parking facilities, a good physical structure, and the ability to project the appearance of an entertaining establishment. Inside the biggest requirement is space. Space is essential for any theatre. An office building with many small rooms which cannot be taken out to make one extremely large room will not work as a theatre. Not only is space needed for the performance (acting area) and the space for the audience (seating area) but also both of these spaces must be adjacent so they bring the audience and performers together.

Space is needed for the stage or performing area whether it be proscenium style, thrust, or in the round. Closely adjoining this space is needed an even larger space for seating the audience. A seating capacity needs to be decided upon so the amount of space for the audience can be estimated. Also, along the same topic, the overhead space must be considered. Since a small number of theatres are proscenium style, very few have need for a lofty grid with complete counterweight system, but still a large amount of overhead space is needed for hanging lighting equipment and scenery if needed.

In addition to the large amount of space required for the seating and staging of the production, a certain amount of space will be needed for a buffet table if the proposed dinner theatre is a self-serve establishment, and a majority of them are. Several rooms will be needed also to provide dressing rooms and backstage facilities for the theatre, a kitchen for the restaurant, and lobby, box office, public restrooms and

so forth for the public. Based upon his research this author computed a minimum amount of space needed for the entire theatre at a small seating capacity of 125 to be 5,000 square feet.

Ideal types of buildings to convert are warehouses or other buildings which have lots of space with high ceilings. If there is too much space, it can easily be partitioned off and subdivided into other rooms, banquet halls, piano bars, etc. Many empty facilities must be examined to find one within the producer's price range and space-renovation requirements. Of responding theatres, 50 percent indicated that their theatres were housed in buildings which were not originally theatres, but renovated to their use.

Construction of a New Theatre

If money is no object, perhaps the best solution to acquiring a new theatre is to build one. However, money is quite frequently a major object. In building a new theatre there are some important advantages, the first being the ability to build what the producer wants and to settle for nothing less, until budget cuts begin to make changes in the original architecture. A new theatre may attract more new patrons compared with an older building, but cannot be depended upon to fill houses if the productions and food qualities do not meet equally high standards.

The main drawback to building a theatre, aside from raising the capital to build, is the improbability to having built exactly what is desired. Unless the producer himself has considerable technical skill and knowledge, he will be at the mercy of an architect who all too frequently may not know much about the essentials of designing specifically for the theatre. The architectural designer may be limited because of

budget or may even try to be too creative and "artsy." Once the design is completed and approved, the producer must then work with contractors and a construction firm to get the design transferred into solid materials. Here is where many buildings lose to the cutting-of-costs syndrome. The contractor cuts costs by purchasing materials of cheaper and less durable quality. These cost cuts often show up in the future by way of costly repair bills for leaky roofs and faulty wiring or plumbing.

In addition to construction problems and even before they begin, one must have the land upon which to construct. The list could go on infinitely with problems; however, all of these may be balanced against the single advantage mentioned earlier, that of having built exactly what is needed so that no renovations and adaptations are necessary. Ecology may be another reason for using an already constructed building. This allows for reusing things already existing instead of becoming a "disposable" society. Also, sometimes older buildings are built better than newer ones.

Only 28.5 percent of the responding theatres confirmed their buildings were specifically constructed for them. Perhaps this low figure indicates the problems of construction or the problems of raising the funds. A beginning establishment is best advised to work in an already existing building for the obvious reason of lower costs. If this establishment becomes extremely successful, as many have, the question of constructing a new theatre may be postponed indefinitely because of most businessmen's desire not to disturb a good thing.

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

Most states have strict building codes and regulations for thea-

tres. Many also have equally strict codes and regulations for restaurants. In dinner theatre the producer is combining both businesses and must, therefore, abide by codes applicable to each. One of the first items to consider is zoning. Zoning is the process whereby certain types of business buildings and traffic are permitted only in certain sectors of the city.⁴⁶ Theatres and restaurants must abide by city ordinances.

The best thing to do before attempting to set up one's theatre is, of course, to get professional aid. Any business should retain a good legal counsel to help with all such problems, the lawyer being more knowledgeable of laws and statutes than the average person. Lawyers are expensive; however, they cannot be avoided.

Legal Considerations for the Theatre

Theatres like any other business must be certified by various city offices in order to operate. In most cities a business license will be necessary and, in order to obtain this, the building will need to be inspected for safety. Laws regarding licenses and inspections will vary from place to place; however, if the theatre wishes a very stringent code by which to set its standards, it may adopt the guidelines offered by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, a branch of the United State Government designed to inspect the safety of working conditions and to report on workers' safety.⁴⁷

⁴⁶C. McKim Norton, "Eliminating of Incompatible Uses and Structures,": Urban Land Use Policy; The Central City, ed. Richard B. Andrews (New York: The Free Press, 1972), p. 93.

⁴⁷Paul Brodeur, "Annals of Industry, Casualties of the Workplace," The New Yorker, October 29, 1973, p. 76.

Legal Considerations for the Restaurant

Restaurants have more standards to uphold than theatres because their products are not only being viewed by the patrons but actually consumed by them. In addition to other business licenses a theatre restaurant must obtain a certificate from the local State Board of Health which will include a detailed inspection of kitchen and dining facilities and preparations. Also, the theatre may want to obtain a license from the State Liquor Commission in order to sell drinks on the premises. This will involve more paper work and investigations by inspectors and government agents.⁴⁸ Depending on the state, liquor by the drink may or may not be a serious problem. In the state of Kansas private club membership must be solicited before patrons can obtain mixed drinks, although at the time of this writing legislation is being considered to change this law. In the city of Lincoln, Nebraska, only two liquor licenses are granted each year, so it makes obtaining one a difficult task.⁴⁹

As far as legal considerations go, not much more can be said because they vary so widely from state to state and even from city to city. Producing on Broadway by Donald C. Farber is an excellent book concerning New York City laws and regulations governing professional theatre, but not all of it applies to theatres in other parts of the country.⁵⁰ The best solution is to contact a lawyer in the chosen city.

⁴⁸Scott, personal interview.

⁴⁹Wolvin, telephone interview.

⁵⁰Donald C. Farber, Producing on Broadway (New York: Drama Book Specialists/Publishers, 1969), pp. vii-xxviii.

Chapter 3

THE FACILITIES

Once the theatre has been selected and work has been done to renovate or construct the building of the professional theatre restaurant, one must decide on many things concerning how the theatre will be designed and built to offer a functional performance area. In this chapter many of these choices will be examined and compared with choices made by already existing theatres in operation.

SIZE OF THE THEATRE

Size is an important item to consider when renovating or building a theatre. Much has already been said about the size of the entire physical structure in the preceding chapter dealing with selection and renovation of a building to be used as a dinner theatre. Now under consideration is the interior size of the actual performance space and the space for the proposed seating capacity.

Acting and Backstage Areas

Theatres attended by this author have had extremely small stages estimated at no larger than sixteen feet by twenty feet, or 320 square feet. Because of limitations in the number of questions practical on the survey, it was impossible to request all useful dimensions from the surveyed dinner theatres. However, dinner theatre lends itself to an intimate performer-audience relationship, considering the fact that the

majority of surveyed establishments seat under 500 per performance.⁵¹

This small audience dictates the use of an appropriately small stage area.

A backstage area is comprised of mainly dressing rooms, scenery shop, storage area, and miscellaneous wing space and work area. Of the surveyed theatres, 64 percent responded that they had ample storage and work space backstage with the remaining 36 percent indicating a lack of appropriate backstage area. The backstage area is dependent upon such factors as the number of actors required by the usual types of productions presented. The amount of work and storage space required for costumes and scenery for the typical productions is also a determining factor in the amount of backstage area needed. However, regardless of needed space, the exact allotted area depends mainly upon the chosen building site and its adaptability to a theatre. If the producer is extremely lucky, he may find a building with ample space for all types of productions including those with huge casts and those with abundant scenery to be stored in the wings. If the producer is fortunate enough to have his theatre designed and built specifically for his purposes, he should plan abundant space.

Audience Seating Capacity and Table Arrangement

As mentioned previously, there are four categories of dinner theatres depending upon their seating capacities. Petite dinner theatres, according to Equity, range up to a seating capacity of 229.⁵² Of the surveyed theatres, 25 percent held petite sized audiences, with 50 per-

⁵¹92.8 percent.

⁵²Actors' Equity Association, Agreement, p. 11.

cent categorized as small. These statistics support the statement made earlier that dinner theatre lends itself to an intimate performer-audience relationship. The theatre may not be so small as to make the seating capacity economically unfeasible in projected income; however, a small house can have distinct advantages in making the audience feel more comfortable and feel more a part of the actual performance.

This author has been told of so-called dinner theatres where the meal was served in a dining hall and the patrons then moved into an auditorium for the performance afterwards. This would necessitate two separate rooms capable of holding the audience at capacity. This arrangement does not fit the Equity definition of dinner theatre quoted on page seven of this study. For the purposes of this report such an arrangement is not considered a dinner theatre since it is essentially a theatre and a restaurant under a single management and not a total entertainment concept.

Eliminating the above style of presentation, the need in the audience area of the theatre for tables as well as chairs becomes obvious. In order to maintain the close environment of intimate theatre, to conserve room, and possibly to boost the seating capacity, tables should be as small as possible to comfortably hold the essentials of the dining equipment, plates, glasses and utensils. The chairs should also be as small as comfort will allow; however, in this case the producer must remember the patrons will be seated for a much longer time than is the custom in a regular theatre or restaurant. Extra care should be made for their comfort in the chosen chair styles.

The floor space of the dinner theatre must be broken up by multiple aisles. In a conventional theatre it is quite feasible for

audience members to squeeze by each other in continental seating. This is not possible with tables and chairs in place of narrow rows, especially when audience members and waiters will be moving about before the show carrying trays and plates of food and drinks. Many cities and states also have fire and safety codes specifying the number of feet and inches needed for each aisle and the distance each audience member in a theatre can be from an aisle.⁵³ This is another matter where the producer needs direct research into city and state laws.

Floor space must also be broken up vertically for the best viewing conditions of the audience. In a night club where the entertainment may be mainly variety format with comedy monologues and singing, the visual element is not as critical as with the presentation of legitimate theatre. In a dinner theatre every person in attendance will need to have an unobstructed view of the stage area. Just as in non-dinner theatres, the floor should be terraced with the back of the house at a higher level than the part nearest the stage. This allows audience members to see over the heads of people between the performers and themselves. A terraced floor is also a necessity since the space taken up by tables and chairs will limit the amount of staggered seating possible. Staggered seating is needed to enable the audience members to see between the heads of those in front of them. This writer has attended a dinner theatre where all of the seating was on a flat floor without any form of terracing or rake. It was a constant source of irritation not to be able to see the action well because of the tables blocking the view. This theatrical experience was by far a less entertaining evening than one at

⁵³The American Theatre Planning Board, Inc., Theatre Check List (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), p. 66.

which the entire theatre was terraced with tables rising in tiers from the stage to the back wall, allowing for easy visibility from any spot in the house. One variation from most non-dinner theatre houses that should be strictly followed is the terracing of seating rather than raking or sloping the floor. The audience members would not enjoy eating at a table which slanted toward the stage, not to mention sitting on the same angle, since chairs would be used rather than attached auditorium seats. The steps from level to level should also be well marked and uniformly gradual if the audience members are expected to carry plates of food from a centrally located buffet line to their tables.

STYLE OF THE THEATRE

In this section the style of the theatre staging area will be considered. This element dictates seating conditions and other building and space requirements, not to mention limitations in scenic and lighting design.

Theatre in the Round

Theatre in the round or arena staging is "a theatre in which the audience completely surrounds the performing area."⁵⁴ Of course, aisle space must be left in strategic points of the audience area to allow the passage of actors as well as audience members into and out of the theatre and the acting area in the center. With audience members sitting on all sides of the performance area the main item to consider is the lack of realistic scenery. A box set cannot be used in this condition. When

⁵⁴The American Theatre Planning Board, Inc., p. 7

scenery is limited thusly, the emphasis is put on props, costumes and lighting.⁵⁵ These production elements must be adapted to the performance by a skilled designer. Of the theatres surveyed, 33 percent worked with arena stages.

Thrust Stage Theatre

Another type of open staging theatre is the thrust stage. This is "a stage which extends the performing area out into the audience to a considerable degree."⁵⁶ Most thrust stages are proscenium stages or stages of other types which have rear walls immediately behind the acting area. The acting area is then extended into the house so the audience surrounds it on three sides. Thrust staging does allow for some use of realistic scenery. It limits the traditional scenic design only slightly, allowing more of the stage area to be revealed than would be possible in the traditional proscenium theatre. Approximately 46 percent of the theatres surveyed use a thrust stage making this the largest percentage for one particular style of theatre. The obvious advantage, which makes this architectural style desirable, is its ability to combine both the arena stage and the proscenium stage by using techniques of both.

Proscenium Staging

The proscenium, or picture-frame stage, is "a theatre in which the audience faces the performing area from one side only, and in which there is a proscenium arch spanning the front of the performing area."⁵⁷

⁵⁵Statement by Gary Carton, theatre instructor, ESU, in a class lecture, Emporia, Kansas, February 10, 1978.

⁵⁶The American Theatre Planning Board, Inc., p.7.

⁵⁷The American Theatre Planning Board, Inc., p. 7.

This style is the traditional form used in the western theatre, which was originally developed in the Italian Renaissance theatres and used to the present day.⁵⁸ Many newer proscenium stages exhibit marvels of scenographic technique and machinery, but in the dinner theatre the proscenium causes some limitations. Since the audience can only view the performance from one side, the best seats are in the center of the house and gradually become worse as a viewer travels toward the sides. This limits radically the amount of table and chair space if the producer wants to give his patrons good seats. This problem does not arise often in the other forms of theatre discussed in the preceding sections. Statistics indicate that proscenium stages are not as popular with existing producers in dinner theatres. Only 13 percent of the theatres surveyed used proscenium staging. Most producers use this style for a dinner theatre only when the theatre is ready for use without needing other extensive renovation work. Proscenium theatres also work well for shows requiring much use of extensive scenic machinery. Oftentimes musicals work best when produced in proscenium theatres because these stages allow for the element of spectacle and ease in changing scenery for numerous locations.

Other Types of Staging

Other types of staging aside from these three do exist. The only other major category can be termed flexible staging. With flexible staging the theatre does not limit its style, but depends on the arrangement of the house and acting area, both of which are made movable for easy adaptations. Flexible staging can be quite difficult for the dinner

⁵⁸Brockett, pp. 132-144.

theatre. If the seating area is changed from production to production flexible staging may involve the removal or construction of the terracing units of the floor as well as considerable storage space necessary for extra tables and chairs not in use.

One type of staging which does not specifically fit in any of the first three categories mentioned is used in one of the major dinner theatres in Kansas City. The acting area is used for portable buffet tables during the dinner hour. When it is time for the show to begin the buffet tables are rolled away and the stage rolls out from a proscenium style curtained area of a wall. It then becomes a three-quarter round thrust stage. A similar stage which used air-casters to float to a three-quarter thrust stage was described by one of the responding theatres from Florida.

EQUIPMENT

Equipment for the theatre varies depending upon the style of the theatre, the types of productions presented, and the clientele desired. Technical equipment of a theatre falls mainly into the areas of stage devices and scenery shifting machinery, lighting controls, and sound equipment.

The Stage

The stage itself can be literally covered with devices to shift scenery and otherwise aid in the performance of various productions. Such machines are always costly and are occasionally prone to malfunction or to break down entirely. If such devices are absolutely essential to the quality of productions chosen, they can be wise investments, but

often are not essential to productions presented.

Traps. Traps or trap doors have been in use since the time of Shakespeare.⁵⁹ They can be quite handy when used for spectacular entrances and "magic" effects, as well as permitting entrances and exits to be taken through the floor when a second story effect is desired. Many stages do not have traps; many do not have basements to which the traps may descend. Most productions work quite well without them and the few shows that do call for trap doors can often be re-staged so the trap is not essential to the plot.

Flying equipment. Counterweight systems and elaborate pulley and hoist equipment are often built into proscenium theatres. They provide the ability to "fly" scenery, drops, curtains and so forth into the loft area above the stage and out of the sight of the audience. A counterweight system can make possible seemingly miraculous scene changes. Unfortunately, a counterweight system is most effective when used in a proscenium theatre where the machinery can be masked from view. Limitations of the proscenium theatre have already been mentioned. Moreover, there are other ways of achieving similar effects without a counterweight system as is often necessary in smaller theatres (such as high school auditoriums and community playhouses) where lofts do not exist.

Wagons. Wagons, also called by a complete storehouse of other specialized names including tip jacks, outriggers and such, essentially are all devices for putting large pieces of scenery on wheels and rolling them into place. This scenery shifting technique works best when there is ample wing space provided in which to hold the wagons and other movable

⁵⁹Brockett, p. 177.

units until they are needed onstage. This technique works quite well in a proscenium theatre with wing space, but does not work well in a thrust theatre or on an arena stage. Exceptions may be noted, if one considers as one gigantic wagon the stage which rolls into place as described on page 42. Smaller units of scenery can often be placed on wagons and left onstage throughout the performance. They can then be regrouped and used by the actors at their needs.

Wagons are generally a part of the scenery and built to use in a particular show. They are rarely stock units of the stage equipment as a counterweight system would be. There are exceptions to this statement, too. Some theatres have special tracks built into the floors of their stages which carry pre-designed wagons to central stage locations. For different productions settings are constructed on the stock wagons and then rolled into place as needed.

One other device oftentimes built into a stage is the turntable. A turntable is a huge disc many times constructed into the stage floor and mechanized in newer theatres. This disc performs the same basic function as a wagon. Various sets can be placed on the turntable to be moved into position as needed. A turntable can also be constructed for a theatre to use in a specific production if one does not already exist in the structure of the building. Turntables are quite effective with three dimensional scenery by allowing the scenery to turn and the actors to use all sides in addition to their use for bringing on different settings. These, too, work well on proscenium stages; however, the turntable probably works better in a greater number of staging styles than the stock wagon.

Elevator stages. A recent trend in new theatre construction has been the

use of the elevator stage. It combines the versatility of the flexible staging concept with the traditional stage and eliminates the need for platforms, trap doors and similar items. The elevator stage is the stage area (all of it or just a certain portion depending upon the initial planning and budget) of the theatre mounted on a hydraulic system whereby the floor or sections of it can be raised and lowered by mechanical controls as needed. These types of stages can provide a creative outlet for the designer, but only at great initial expense. If money is no obstacle, it may be worthwhile to invest in such a device; but generally speaking, it is a non-essential frill that a small dinner theatre can easily manage without.

Other devices. This section has merely skimmed the surface of devices for changing scenery and for facilitating productions. Other devices can be considered and examined by looking through any good, current stagecraft book, such as Theatre Backstage from A to Z by Warren C. Lounsbury.⁶⁰

Lighting

The American stage has for years depended strongly upon lighting to create mood, to add to the aesthetic merit, and to support the scenic element of theatre in addition to providing illumination with which to see the performance. As stated earlier, the lighting may be of greater emphasis in thrust or arena staging when scenery cannot be used to the extent it is used in the proscenium theatre. For these reasons, the lighting of a dinner theatre is of extreme importance.

⁶⁰Warren C. Lounsbury, Theatre Backstage from A to Z (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967), pp. 131-134.

Location and type of dimmer controls. Theatrical light has four main qualities which enable it to create mood and composition. These are intensity, color, distribution and movement.⁶¹ The first category, that of intensity, deals with the brightness or dimness of the light which is generally regulated by some form of dimmer control. An electrician operates the controls during the actual performance and can cause changes in the four qualities throughout, greatly affecting the end production. The controls of theatrical lights run through devices known as dimmers, which increase or decrease the amount of power to the individual instruments. The dimmers are operated either directly by a mechanical control arm or electronically through the use of a remote control board with various levers, switches and dials to influence the dimmers.

The optimum choice is to have a control booth located either in the audience or toward the rear of the house so the operator can view and hear the production while working the controls for the lights. This is not always feasible. One theatre attended by this writer used a closed circuit television camera to relay the visual performance to the operator located elsewhere in the theatre. Since space is a critical question in theatre restaurants, it may be impractical to have a control booth in the auditorium itself. The closed circuit solution is one way of solving the problem, albeit an expensive one. Theatres have functioned without the operator viewing the performance, and in a case of necessity, the lighting operator can be placed virtually anywhere as long as he is in communication with the stage manager or someone who can give cues.

⁶¹W. Oren Parker and Harvey K. Smith, Scene Design and Stage Lighting (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968). p. 287.

Dimmers tend to generate heat and so their placement may be a question to consider. Most theatres tend to conceal the actual dimmers in an extra basement room. This may not be practical on a limited budget. To conserve on wiring costs one theatrical supply agent suggested placing the dimmers in special brackets mounted on the ceiling near the placement of the lighting positions.⁶² This would eliminate the need for a patch panel if the instruments could be wired directly to the dimmers themselves.

When a remote control board is used, a place must be found to locate it. A control room with view of the stage is ideal. No matter where it is located, wiring costs will accrue in connecting the control board to the dimmers located in a different place. Despite these wiring costs, it is more advantageous to have a remote controlled dimmer system than to use the outdated manually operated dimmers, such as old rheostat and autotransformer dimmers.⁶³

Types of lighting instruments used. From the dimmers the electrical power must be channeled into circuits which serve various lighting instruments. Three types of instruments are most popular in small theatres: the ellipsoidal spotlight, the fresnel spotlight and the scoop floodlight. Spotlights provide strong illumination and can be used to place light on certain desired areas, either focused to a sharp spot or blended into a hazy flooded wash of light. The most versatile of the spotlight family is the ellipsoidal spotlight. Coming in a variety of sizes and priced

⁶²Statement by Steve Butler, agent for SECT, Wichita, Kansas, in a personal interview, March 4, 1978.

⁶³Parker and Smith, pp. 383-388.

approximately \$100 or more, this instrument can serve many purposes and is considered the mainstay of the lighting system.

The fresnel spotlight has many limitations which make it a less than desirable instrument for all purposes; however, it has one distinct advantage. It is extremely inexpensive for the use as a spotlight in comparison to other instruments. When used for short distance throws of light and as general acting area lighting, fresnels work quite well and are priced at approximately \$60.

Scoops and other floodlights are used primarily to flood the stage with light or to light backdrops and scenery. They have little use for focusing capabilities, but are excellent when a lot of light is needed in general areas.

Location and masking of instruments when in use. In many proscenium theatres special false beams and bridges or coves are built into the house to hide the lighting instruments from the audience. In arena staging or even in three-quarter thrust staging, since the lighting angles must be more universal to light the actors from a multitude of different viewing angles, it is virtually impossible to hide the lighting instruments from the audience. If the instruments are in good working condition and are kept fairly clean and tidy (with an effort made to make any use of connector cables appear somewhat neat and organized) they can add to the atmosphere of the theatre when in full view of the audience.

Lighting areas for theatres are generally overhead. Fixed pipes upon which to hang instruments should be installed in the ceiling providing an encompassing area over the stage to allow the positioning of instruments where necessary. It would be a good plan to provide per-

manently wired circuit outlets along these pipes so as to eliminate the use of many long cables and cords.

Connectors, switchboards, patch panels and wiring. When permanent wiring allows for circuit outlets near the hanging positions of the instruments a theatre usually needs a patch panel. This is a large switchboard located backstage which allows a cross wiring to connect any particular circuit to any desired dimmer. Such panels may be too advanced for the novice theatre starting with a limited budget. Any permanent wiring system can be used as well, within limits.

Any permanent wiring (and the more there is, the safer and the better the theatre will be) should be done by qualified electricians. Wiring and electrical work will need to be inspected by the local fire marshall to ensure the safety of the public. Connector pins on instruments and outlets should be of a type which will not permit an instrument or a live cable accidentally to come unplugged causing light failure and possible safety hazards. One type of locking connector is the twist-lock connector. Others are on the market which are just as effective and sometimes cheaper.⁶⁴

Sound

Sound equipment is essential to any functional theatre. In an intimate theatre with small house and seating capacities such factors limit the needs for elaborate equipment; although some will still be necessary.

Location and type of sound equipment. Large Broadway theatres may need amplification in order to ensure the star will be heard in the last row.

⁶⁴Butler, personal interview.

In a small theatre, such as the type being examined, an actor should be able to fill the house with his voice without resorting to electronic amplification. If the actor cannot be heard in a 500 seat auditorium, another actor should be chosen for the role. Eliminating the need for electronic amplification of actors does not, however, eliminate the need for sound equipment. Many productions call for sound effects which cannot be imitated live backstage; hence, recorded and electronic effects are needed. Also it is a good idea to play some pre-show music during dinner so the audience has the comfortable feeling of pleasant surroundings.

The above mentioned requirements necessitate speakers and sound amplifiers being built into the theatre. Recording devices and phonograph players are also a must for the well-equipped sound control area. Speakers, microphones and other incidentals. Speakers can be purchased in almost any size and style. A style should be chosen that will blend well with the décor of the rest of the theatre. The speakers may be permanently mounted into walls of the building or hung or placed in a makeshift way to serve their function. This will depend upon the producer's tastes and wants. In order to record sound effects microphones are needed. The microphones must be compatible with the other components of the system. They may be used on rare occasions during the performances by an on-stage actor or an off-stage one. If any public announcements are needed during intermissions or before or after the performances, a microphone would be helpful to the announcer.

Permanent wiring can be put in the building much the way it has been mentioned in reference to lighting. Many outlets for speakers or microphone jacks should be incorporated into the building. A sound engi-

neer should be consulted when deciding on a system. Much will, of course, also depend on artistic choices of the producer and the physical structure given for him to work in.

Communications equipment for different parts of the theatre. As described in another section, one theatre kept in communication by use of closed circuit television. This is quite extravagant for a novice to the business, but ways must exist for the stage manager to contact the electrician and sound engineer during the production. Other stations to be contacted depending upon the production, are scenery shifters, box office workers and such. Use of headsets is the most common method of communication. These units allow mobility and free hands to work other controls while the ear and mouth are in positions to communicate directly with others in the headset communications link.

PRODUCTION ELEMENTS

Many items come into a production which may vary from show to show. These one show items, including costumes, props and scenery, will be discussed under the group heading of production elements.

Costumes

One major consideration for productions in dinner theatres is the costumes for the performance. If the theatre uses a thrust or arena stage with the audience in a closer relationship to the performers, the costumes must reflect more careful treatment in construction and design than is often necessary with theatrical costumes.

Acquisition. Costumes for a production may be obtained in a variety of ways. One of the easiest ways is by dealing with a rental firm and renting all costumes needed for any particular production. Many such firms

exist throughout the country and some handle quite large stocks of apparel to fit any period and size. Some rental houses even make up packages for different show titles and can supply the entire costume plot and wardrobe for any popular musical or comedy often produced in dinner theatres. The main drawback to renting costumes is the charge. There are other ways of obtaining costumes which do not cost nearly as much and oftentimes provide better end results, such as those described in the following sections. In addition to the charges, rented costumes are pre-designed by the supplier which eliminates some of the creativity of the theatre staff. There may also be postal and shipping delays if the costumes are not ordered in advance.

Costumes may be purchased from a supply house if one has the particular styles desired. This is less advantageous than renting. It does increase the theatre's stock of costumes, but it is more expensive than rental and fraught with the same problems. Clothing that does not particularly come in the category of costumes, but which can be used as such for a particular play may be purchased. Purchasing is usually more expensive than construction; however, this is not the case with some apparel items such as shoes.

Usually, the most inexpensive way to obtain the desired costumes is by constructing them. In large professional theatres costumes are often constructed by a costume supply house on a commission from the theatre. This could be done, though at great expense. In smaller theatres, universities, and repertory companies the costumes are generally constructed by the staff of the theatre in the theatre's own costume shop. In this way they may be constructed under the direct supervision of the designer. If the theatre has access to sewing machines and talented

workers this is by far the best method to choose. If the theatre staff does not have access to these items, it can save money in the long run to make the initial investment.

Costumes and special pieces sometimes may be borrowed from other theatres, institutions and academic theatres. It is a good idea to make friends in places where such items can be borrowed if need be for a particular production. It is not a good idea to always borrow the entire wardrobe for each production. This will become a bother to the lending institution unless it is getting a return benefit from it, such as free publicity. Special arrangements depend on the circumstances.

Of the theatres surveyed the most popular method of obtaining costumes for productions was to construct them, with 56.2 percent opting for this choice, 6.3 percent renting costumes, 25 percent borrowing costumes and 12.5 percent having the costumes provided by the actors.

Storage and repair. Sufficient space must be allowed in the theatre design to store unused costumes. Those being used in each particular production can usually be stored in the actors' dressing rooms until needed on stage. If costumes are constructed or purchased and a stock of them is built up, they must be kept somewhere on the chance that they may be reused in the future. If storage is not possible on the theatre premises, a warehouse might be rented for this specific purpose. This is expensive and bothersome unless the space can be used for more than just costume storage, such as for storing and constructing scenery.

If costumes are constructed, a costume construction shop is a necessity. This should also be located on the premises. The costume shop can then supply repair facilities for any last minute or on-stage emergencies that might arise. If the shop is located elsewhere, on-the-

spot emergency repair equipment is essential to the theatre. Costumes must also be laundered and cleaned during the run of the production for the benefit of appearance and for actor comfort. They should always be in good repair and well cleaned before put into storage. This is also especially important when they are borrowed or rented and must be returned. The good care of loaned costumes will help the theatre establish a good reputation for any future loans.

Props

Properties involve any items used during the play which are not specifically pieces of the setting or parts of the costumes. These may include furniture and furnishings of the basic set, or they may be items carried by and used by the actors. Such items must be designed, chosen and located for each individual production.

Acquisition. Just as there are four basic means of gathering costumes, so too, there are the same four means of gathering props for any given show. Many of the supply houses which rent costumes will also rent properties to theatres. Oftentimes these are costume-related items such as parasols, canes and so forth, but other miscellaneous small items from paper flowers to rubber daggers can be found in catalogues. Rental problems with costumes also apply to rental of properties. However, this may be a good way of acquiring a needed item when it can be found in no other way and would be too difficult or time consuming to build.

Theatrical suppliers often sell property items. These can range from almost anything imaginable, such as varying styles of guns, swords and other weapons to rubber chickens and squirting flowers. It has been the experience of this writer that often purchased props are of extremely inexpensive construction and are not of durable quality, but this is a

way of obtaining unusual novelty items not readily available elsewhere. Props, unlike costumes, are many times items which can easily be found in stores about the community. If a stock of properties for the theatre is desired it is a good idea to purchase inexpensive items needed from local stores, building a good business relationship with the community. Such items may include dishes and utensils to various knick-knacks for set dressing. Although large pieces of furniture are often called for such as tables, chairs and sofas, these are expensive items to purchase from a local vendor in new condition. They may, however, be easily acquired for a fraction of the cost and sometimes in fairly good condition at garage and auction sales if the producer has the time to spend visiting these places.

Prop items can also be constructed. Furniture may be more difficult to construct than costumes and smaller props may be more time consuming and require considerable skill and craftsmanship, but they often can be made more cheaply than purchased. This is particularly the case with unusual items or specially rigged props which must have secret compartments or which must fall apart on cue.

One of the best ways to acquire properties is to borrow them. This is especially appropriate when dealing with large pieces of furniture. Many furniture stores will be glad to lend their floor merchandise if the theatre has a good reputation for being careful with borrowed items and provides free publicity for the merchant. Borrowing expensive items such as furniture entails public relations expertise on behalf of the property master.

Another excellent way of acquiring props is to accept donations of old furniture, clothes, small items, books and so forth. Donations

may help the donor by cleaning out his "junk" and the theatre by building up its stock of usable items. Donations can be solicited by placing ads in the local news media or by specifically advertising for a desired piece. Once the theatre begins accepting items the donation policy may get quite out of hand. If the theatre is popular and people enjoy it, as well as know they can usually unload anything on it, the theatre may become a dumping ground for any and all junk of the community. This author has had personal experience with a high school theatre program which received virtually every outdated, "little old lady" style hat in the community.

Storage and repair. Like costumes, properties must be stored when not in use. Large furniture pieces can also be a major problem since they tend to take up so much room.

Items must often be repaired, recovered or entirely refinished before being used. This should never be done without the express permission of the owner if an item has been borrowed. Repair facilities should be located on the premises for emergency reasons. Useful tools would include various clamps, glues, upholstery items and carpentry tools. Much can also be done with such products as celastic, hot-melt glue and the like.

If an item that was on loan has been damaged, it should always be repaired and an offer made to pay for its replacement if the owner so desires. This practice could be very expensive depending on what the item is, but this ensures extra care on behalf of the theatre and necessitates extra caution in finding persons from whom to borrow.

Scenery

This is the item which can vary the most from production to pro-

duction as well as from types of materials used and design concepts. Scenery is often an important visual support to the production. It can easily overpower a weak performance and, therefore, must be used cautiously and carefully designed. In a thrust or arena stage the scenery is often not as important as it may seem to a proscenium theatre. Still it can be a major element and concern.

Construction. Scenery for productions must be custom built for each particular theatre. Very rarely can a theatre ever borrow or purchase scenery for a production. The main reason for this exclusiveness of scenery is the non-universality of theatres. Some supply houses do rent or sell drops, cycloramas and scrims as well as even selling flats and door or window units, but the production staff generally will have to design scenery which will work in the physical limitations of their building and which will meet the needs of the production.

In order to construct scenery a great deal of space is needed depending, of course, on the scenic designs. In addition to the basic construction space, many tools and power machinery are useful. Any current stagecraft text will provide one with a good idea of the items needed in a scenery shop.⁶⁵ Many theatres do not have adjoining shops, but are forced to build their scenery elsewhere and have it trucked to the theatre when needed. This is not desirable, but will suffice if necessary. Of the theatres surveyed 35.7 percent do not have sufficient storage and work space backstage for scenery nor storage space for costumes and props.

Painting. Once the scenery is constructed it must be painted. For box

⁶⁵Parker and Smith, pp. 124-129.

sets and flat scenery the painting is often done before the flats are actually set up on the stage, but at times this can be done once the materials are in place. The advantage of early painting is that it saves time once the scenery is put up. The next step is then to dress and light the set without having to worry about actually finishing the paint job.

To paint scenery a number of tools including marking equipment, brushes, and sprayers are necessary. Ideally, these items should be located in the scene shop where the construction of the scenic units takes place. Types of paints to be used can range from water to latex to oil based paints. The best for general scenery use, of course, is a water based scene paint which is quite inexpensive and which can be removed with soap and water when the show closes so the scenery may be repainted for another production. Scene Design and Stage Lighting by W. Oren Parker and Harvey K. Smith has very good sections illustrating what tools can be used and what arrangement to have for a scene and properties shop.⁶⁶ This book is a valuable reference book for anyone beginning to set up a functional backstage area.

Storage. Storage space for scenery can be more difficult than that for properties, since scenic units many times occupy even more space than furniture pieces. Various techniques can be used to make scenic units which will collapse and take up less space in storage, but still some room is necessary.

STORAGE AND WORK SPACE

⁶⁶Parker and Smith, pp. 124-129.

The need for storage and work space in a theatre cannot be over-emphasized. In the preceding section storage space was mentioned as a necessary item for costumes, properties and scenery. Space is needed for any theatre wishing to build up a good stock of items which can be reused in future productions. The ideal situation for a dinner theatre working with a limited budget. If storage space does not exist in the chosen theatre, it is a good investment to rent warehouse space elsewhere to store these items. This is an expensive suggestion, but one worth the consideration if storage is really a serious flaw with the theatre design.

In addition to the storage space needed for the above mentioned items, storage space will be needed for many other things. The kitchen must have sufficient storage space for pots, pans, and utensils. There should be large walk-in coolers and freezers for storing perishable food items and storage racks or pantries for non-perishable items. Space must exist for storing extra tables and chairs, linens and dishes, glasses and eating utensils as well. These are items not always considered in general theatre storage concerns.

After finding places to store all of the physical items of the theatre, additional space must be sought for business purposes. A safe should be provided to hold money when the theatre is not open and a bank depository is not readily available. Files should be kept for correspondence, tickets, reservations, bookkeeping records and a host of other financial matters.

Lastly, storage space for the human concerns must be found. A coat check room should be provided for the audience. A "green room" should exist backstage, a place for the actors and stagehands to con-

gregate when not needed on stage and not wanted in the wings taking up valuable space needed for scenery, exits, and entrances.

OTHER CONVENIENCES

Whenever a business is dealing directly with the public as a theatre does, certain conveniences must exist. These conveniences are of the types which will establish a good public relations rapport with the audience and put them in a proper frame of mind to be entertained. They will also help to make the theatre appear attractive and desirable as a place to go, as well as making the patrons want to come again if they have a good time.

Exterior Items

One area which must be of prime consideration is the exterior of the building. This is what the theatre-goers will see when they first come to the establishment. For this reason the exterior must present a good first impression of the theatre.⁶⁷

Parking lot. This should be large enough to hold enough cars to fill a capacity house. It should not be crowded with employee cars which will limit the number of patrons' places. It should be well paved and maintained in the winter. It must be within easy walking distance from the theatre entrance.

Sidewalks. These should lead from the parking lot or the street to the doors of the theatre. They must be well maintained and in good repair. It is a good investment to install some form of underground heating system for the winter months. A canopy or other covering should provide pro-

⁶⁷All of the exterior material will be drawn from The American Theatre Planning Board, Inc., pp. 66-67.

tection from inclement weather.

Lighting. As most theatre productions occur in the evening there must be adequate lighting for the exterior, for the parking area and sidewalks surrounding the building. Exterior lighting serves a two fold purpose. It provides visibility for the patrons, making them feel more comfortable and safe at night and also discourages vandalism when the theatre is not open.

Marquees. Large display signs of the present attraction are often found on theatres. These provide theatrical atmosphere as well as inexpensive publicity. Before investing in one, however, the producer must check with city offices and zoning ordinances. The surveyed dinner theatres seemed sadly lacking in this area. Approximately 18 percent used special lighting during performances, 25 percent used lighted marquees, but over half (56 percent) used no special devices other than adequate lighting to see.

Interior Items

The interior of the theatre should present as good an impression as the exterior to the patrons. It must also preserve the sense of "magic" which often comes to a theatre patron when entering the house.⁶⁸

Lobby. The lobby should be large enough to handle a crowd, should contain such useful items as box office, coat check room, drinking fountains, lounge chairs, restrooms, and a pay phone, and should have an elegant décor.

Coat room. There must be an attendant on hand at all times to offer

⁶⁸All interior material is drawn from the American Theatre Planning Board, Inc., pp. 66-70.

assistance to the customer. Ample room must be provided for the coats of a capacity house. Clean storage of coats as well as hats and other accouterments must be provided for.

Box office. This should be located within the lobby in such a place that lines which may form will not block entrances either to the theatre or to the lobby. At least two windows must be open. Adequate space should be allowed to provide for the staff, ticket racks, telephones, cash register, and a safe. It should be adequately lighted and display seating charts, price listings, seasonal information and any other pertinent information. A burglar alarm should be installed as well as a sound system for paging the lobby and contacting the other parts of the theatre.

Lounge. The lounge may be a part of the lobby to conserve room. It should provide soft seating, and any other comforts which may be desired, such as ash trays, waste cans, drinking fountains, and mirrors. The lounge should be separated from the house and soundproofed so noise does not leak in during a performance.

Bar. Many dinner theatres provide a bar separate from the one which serves the dining area. Advantages to this are the ability to have the bar open separately from the theatre to serve cocktails and mixed drinks after the performance or at times when no performances are scheduled.

Restrooms. Lastly, clean restrooms must be provided. The more stall facilities, the better to accommodate a large crowd during a short intermission. A restroom attendant is an added service which may be appreciated, but which is probably too extravagant financially for a limited budget.

Thus, the theatre restaurant can be designed and set up. All of these facilities can be of help but will not make up for any lack of

professionalism or quality in the food or performances. The use of good facilities will depend on artistic and business like decisions of the producer. A staff must be hired with great care; and the successful management of the staff and facilities should result in a financially successful business.

Chapter 4

METHODS OF OPERATION

Up to this point this study has been concerned with what choices were available to the prospective producer when he is planning to set up a professional dinner theatre. This information was based on experience and conjecture of this writer with resource material drawn from surveyed theatres and written material covering theatre and restaurant management.

In the following chapter the method of operation of a professional dinner theatre is discussed. The point of view taken is that of a theatre which has already been equipped and is ready to begin production. Choices of methods of operation will need to be made by the producer, but the emphasis upon resource material changes. The majority of the reference material in this chapter is drawn directly from the completed surveys of dinner theatres. As always, any ultimate choice depends on a host of variables, all of which cannot be covered in this report. Many decisions must be left entirely to the novice producer. However, this section attempts to show what has been done in this field.

STAFF

The staff of the professional theatre is of the utmost importance. Personnel must be carefully selected and properly trained in order to facilitate the functioning of the theatre. Staffing the theatre involves various groups of people, performers and non-performers, plus theatre and restaurant workers. The key to a successful staff is proper management.

Management

In this case the term "management" is used to cover all areas of staff related concerns. The first decisions which must be made by the prospective producer are what staff positions need to be filled and by whom.

Finding and hiring the staff. To decide on staff positions, the producer needs to chart out all of the jobs in the operation which must be done before attempting to find the right persons to fill these jobs. A chart can be found in Appendix A of the minimum staff requirements for a stock theatre using an Actors' Equity Association company with a multi-production season.⁶⁹ This chart gives an idea of the positions which need to be filled. Hiring the staff of the theatre can be very expensive since a professional theatre must be able to pay competitive wages. However, it is possible to combine some jobs to cut down on positions. Also, "Professional salaried personnel are able to accomplish a job more efficiently than a nonprofessional volunteer staff, so the former should have fewer staff requirements."⁷⁰

Of the theatres surveyed, half (50 percent) employed a regular staff of fifty or more employees. The other theatres were divided among the varying smaller amounts listed on the questionnaire in Appendix B. This information indicates that dinner theatres are prone to large staff requirements. A major reason is the fact that a dinner theatre must pay a staff for the theatre as well as a staff for the restaurant. In combining two businesses into one, a dinner theatre is also combining two staffs and therefore requires one larger and more diversified staff than for either of the two businesses individually.

⁶⁹Langley, p. 72.

⁷⁰Langley, p. 71.

When the producer has decided which jobs can be combined and which are not essential for his particular theatre, he must then hire the personnel. Jobs which are currently being staffed in the successful dinner theatres according to the conducted survey include such positions as: producer, director, business manager, bookkeeper, technical director, publicity director, box office manager, secretary, chef, kitchen workers, bartender, waiters and waitresses, house manager, stage manager, busboys and janitors. People must be found to apply for these various positions.

Several theatre trade magazines and journals advertise job openings around the country for various positions. Periodicals like Theatre Crafts or the American Theatre Association Placement Service Bulletin are a good source for advertising for a theatre staff. Universities often handle placement services for their students, and recent theatre graduates make excellent selections for workers. For clerical positions or for other positions which can be filled by someone who does not have to exhibit a particular expertise in a specialized field, such as technical theatre, local employment services and newspaper advertisements may bring in a number of acceptable applicants.

Restaurant staff members are best located by local or regional advertisement with employment services and newspapers. As in any hiring situation the person needing employees must conduct a personal interview of the applicant and should request a resume and credentials. This final item is crucial especially when hiring a cook or chef. The quality of the food and service may be of paramount importance in building the initial clientele. People may find it harder to overlook unpleasant food than they will to overlook minor flaws in a good production.

Once the person has been found to apply for a particular job, a formal application must be made. Standard items appearing on an application form include the following: applicant's name and social security number; present address, if temporary until what date; permanent address; present telephone number, answering service, or other telephone. The education section should have high school and year completed, college and degrees completed with dates, or professional training workshops attended. In addition to a statement of career goals, a listing of experience is needed including positions held with dates, and the names and addresses of at least three persons who may be requested to provide statements about the applicant.⁷¹

Personnel management. There are several general principles of personnel management which should be kept in mind. The first is job orientation.⁷² This means training the worker to do his or her job. Many employers believe in throwing a new employee into the job and letting him or her learn by doing. This approach is a less satisfactory principle for it allows for the employee to repeat many mistakes which may have been made before and which could have been avoided by orientation. The employer who does not attempt to brief an employee on what is expected of him is courting problems.

Theatre has always been and always should be a group effort. The producer may many times feel he could do things the way he may want them done better than his staff can, but he must resist this tendency if he is to create a properly trained staff. The second major element of personnel management is the allocation of responsibility.⁷³ This system provides

⁷¹Langley, p. 63.

⁷²Langley, p. 66.

⁷³Langley, p. 68.

assignment of decision-making jobs to people in the chain of command and allows the work to progress more swiftly. At the same time such allocations will relieve the producer and other upper-level theatre workers to do their jobs creatively without being bothered by minutiae.

Work supervision is the third tenet of personnel management.⁷⁴

This principle provides for a chain of command in the employee ranks. Each person working for the theatre must know who his direct superior is. When a person has two or three direct superiors, the chain of command becomes cloudy and communications can break down, which can cause chaos and attitude problems on behalf of the workers. If each person is directly responsible to one person only, then his job will be supervised and usually will be executed in the way it was intended. Each supervisor may have a number of people working under him, but in turn he is responsible to one person directly above him.

Actors

Up to this point the personnel discussed were restaurant and theatre staff. These workers are the people, either on full-time or part-time salary, who are most likely to remain stable for a time, and are most likely hired on a seasonal basis. The performers, on the other hand, often vary from production to production as the need for cast members varies with each play chosen. In stock theatres a group of actors may be signed to a seasonal contract and then used as need be for the productions. At times they will not be working, but will be getting paid by their contracts. At other times they will be required contractually to perform. This method of hiring is an extravagance in terms of the

⁷⁴Langley, p. 70.

budget, however it does ensure a group of performers who are available at the beck and call of the producer. Since these choices are open with regard to performers, they are considered separately from the rest of the theatre staff.

Equity and professional actors. Actors' Equity Association (referred to as AEA) is the labor union for professional actors performing in the legitimate theatre. Almost all big-name celebrities are members of AEA. Thus, if the producer plans to use celebrities in the productions, he must make a formal agreement with the local or nearby AEA office. The advantage of using Equity actors is the use of big celebrities who may attract audiences by virtue of their fame and popularity alone. Also, an Equity contract specifies certain contractual obligations of the performer to the producer, such as being prompt to calls, attending all required rehearsals, paying strict regard to make-up and dress, taking proper care of the costumes and props, and abiding by all rules of the producer not in conflict with any AEA rules.⁷⁵

Disadvantages of using AEA actors are often more numerous than the advantages. The main disadvantage is the cost involved. Equity actors have specific union wages that must be met before they are allowed to perform. In addition to wages there are many hidden costs by way of fringe benefits including transportation, requirements of food and lodging, and other necessary agreement items ranging from the sizes of dressing rooms to restroom facilities. At times there are even requirements of certain types of flooring used in the theatre or certain room temperatures to be maintained. Most of these rules are a definite benefit for

⁷⁵Actors' Equity Association, Agreement, p. 26.

the actors and are not too unreasonable to request; but if the theatre is operating under a restricted budget, as is usually the case in the first few seasons, many structural items such as the number of showers or stalls in the dressing room restrooms may not be practical to change. The question arises, "Is it worth the extra effort and financial costs to obtain celebrities in hopes of attracting a crowd?" Probably not!

When using AEA actors one must pay the minimum union wage. Most established celebrities will have managers to negotiate contracts, and these performers demand much more than a union minimum. The producer must then decide if the name is truly worth the extra money. Unless the actor is popular enough to draw a big crowd, the answer is no. If the actor is truly this popular, then he may request more money than the theatre budget can afford. The more popular the name, the higher the salary.

One last point to consider about Equity theatres is the rule of AEA requiring an entire Equity company. Only on rare occasions can a theatre hire one AEA actor without having to hire an entire AEA company. If the entire AEA company is used, then there are set limits to the number of actors which must be hired, regardless of cast requirements. Stage managers, directors, and choreographers must also be unionized. When all of these union wages are added, the producer often finds he has overspent his entire budget.

Half of the theatres surveyed were Equity establishments and half were nonprofessional. "Nonprofessional" is an Equity term meaning any theatre (professional or not) which does not hire Equity actors. Of the non-Equity theatres, this author classified 71 percent as successful, while only 57 percent of the Equity theatres were classified as success-

ful. Only 14 percent occasionally hired big-name celebrities out of all the theatres surveyed (both Equity and non-Equity) with the others rarely or never hiring celebrities.

Stock and resident theatres. Stock and resident theatres were mentioned briefly on page 68. A stock theatre is generally one which operates seasonally and with a set number of actors in its company who take on the roles of the plays as needed. Resident theatre is much the same, with a home base city in which the theatre resides. The main difference between the two is that stock theatre tends to be a commercial venture featuring a company of professional actors, while resident theatre tends to be a nonprofit or noncommercial venture with the goals of providing serious or experimental artistic work.⁷⁶ Professional actors may perform in resident theatres, but the goal of the theatres themselves are what makes the difference.

In regards to staffing the performers for the above theatres, dinner theatre falls into the stock category. There are various organizations which provide guidelines for and services for the management of these theatres including the Council of Stock Theatres (COST) and the Council of Resident Stock Theatres (CORST).⁷⁷ These organizations negotiate agreements for their member theatres with actors and with AEA. Other organizations of similar nature exist for resident theatres as well. If the theatre is designed to be specifically one of these types, the producer should consider joining the theatre to one of the appropriate organizations.

As has been mentioned previously, the major drawback to such a

⁷⁶Langley, p. 113.

⁷⁷Langley, p. 119.

company of actors is the fact that on a limited budget the producer is paying actors all year round whether he is using them or not. One solution to this is the use of "nonprofessional" actors, who do not mind doubling and working as waiters, waitresses, technicians, etc. when not cast in a particular production. Another solution is to have open auditions previous to casting each production of the season and to hire actors on a limited contract for the run of the production only.

Community casts. One last resource for obtaining actors is the community itself. Many communities have theatres operating on a volunteer basis. The actors work in other jobs during the day and spend their evenings acting as a hobby and for the enjoyment, rather than for any professional remuneration. The problems involved are those which may arise in any volunteer work basis. The theatre is dependent upon the good spirit and the ego boost it gives the actors. It has no legal or binding hold over them and cannot ask them to do anything they do not wish to do because it really is not their job. For a professional dinner theatre, the producer should stay away from community or volunteer casts eliminating a major problem in diplomacy and public relations. He will not have to contend with pampering an actor who is not paid and has no real reason to perform.

Hiring and firing. Actors are generally hired on the basis of their past record and performances. If the producer knows the actors personally, he may be familiar with the actors' abilities and limitations. This will give the producer the knowledge of whether a specific actor would be able to perform a particular part to his satisfaction. If the producer does not know the actor, he must then ask for a resume and portfolio which will give him some idea of the actor's ability by what he has done

in the past. It is also essential for the unknown actor to audition or present a short performance for the producer so he can gain a better idea about the actor's suitability.

Auditions and actor calls may be announced through the local media and news services or advertised in trade journals. This method reaches a number of local performers as well as performers from a wider area. Many theatres hold auditions in the cities in which most actors can be found: New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles. These are headquarter cities for Equity offices. Whether casting Equity actors or not, a large number of actors can be auditioned in these locations. This procedure requires transportation charges and accommodations as well as office space in these cities for the producer and casting director.

Another means of soliciting actors is by sending notices to theatrical agents. Agents can then contact any performers for whom they work and arrange an audition. Agencies, if reputable, can often provide the best service for the producer and at no cost to him. They work on a percentage basis for the actor.

Lastly, specific contracts should always be drawn up and signed by the theatre representatives and by the actor. This procedure will provide the legal hold the producer needs over the actor to ensure that the actor will perform to the expectations of the producer. It also spells out in detail all of the obligations of the actor to the theatre as well as the theatre to the actor. This way misunderstandings are often eliminated or at least minimized, making a smoother operation of the management for each production. Contracts may be modeled on Actors' Equity Association contracts or may be negotiated by such organizations as COST or CORST. They may also be negotiated by the actor's agency. Regardless

of which style contract is used, the business manager and lawyer of the theatre must be aware of all the terms and find the contract totally suitable. Once it has been signed, it is a legally binding document and must be followed precisely to avoid legal problems.

Production Staff

The production staff of the dinner theatre is composed of all the regularly salaried workers who do not take part in the actual performance of the shows on stage. This includes the pre-production staff of director, designers, other planners and construction crews, as well as the production staff of crew workers and running crew personnel. The restaurant staff may also come under this general heading.

Directors. Each production must be directed by a person in charge of making all artistic decisions for the show. This director is involved in every phase of production from initial planning and casting to the final result in performance. The director in an Equity house must also be a member of Equity. Resident theatres that deal with a set company of actors usually have a resident director as well. This practice is also followed by a number of dinner theatres. One-third (33 percent) of the successful theatres have resident directors.

Another option is to hire directors as needed when the productions come along, much in the same way that actors can be hired for one production only. Over forty percent (40 percent) of the successful theatres responding to the survey stated that they hired directors as needed, rather than retaining one as a resident director. There are always advantages to being able to have guest artists, such as directors for one show only. However, it is more sensible to hire one person for the staff position and to retain him or her rather than to fill a position several

times throughout the season. But, this course of action is not the system followed by most of the successful dinner theatres currently in operation.

Designers. The designer category covers still more people. A production may have a scenographer whose job it is to design the scenic elements of a show, or the designs may be furnished by a collaboration of individuals with the director. Designs must be executed for settings, costumes, properties, lighting and other visual elements of the production. When several people collaborate the group achievement can many times be complete magic. It can also be complete chaos if they do not work well as a unit, or if the director does not furnish a strong concept with which they may work. The financial advantages point to a limited number of designers, or even the use of a single designer of a production.

Designers as directors, may be retained as resident workers, or may be hired as needed. The design element in itself does require creativity and time, but once it has been completed the designer is no longer needed, as the director is, throughout rehearsals. For these reasons, if the designer is going to be a resident staff member and work for a full salary the position must be combined with that of some other task, which can be done during the time when the designer is not needed in that capacity. A good example is the combination technical director/designer. Of the successful theatres, 44 percent have resident designers, 44 percent hire designers as needed, and 12 percent use package shows, never needing to hire a designer at all.

Crew workers. The members of running crews and construction crews may be quite numerous depending upon the needs of each individual production. One solution is simply to hire all of the technicians needed to fill

these positions. This may involve a large expense, even though many of these positions may be secured on a part-time basis or only for a very limited amount of time (as long as it takes to get the set built). Another solution is to use unpaid workers for this task.

The use of volunteer labor has many advantages. Crew workers may not be needed to work strictly on a contractual basis, which will free the theatre from "over-contracting" itself. Volunteers may be interested in theatre or may be theatre arts students from local universities and colleges. They will work because of their interest and experience. The system of apprentice and unpaid workers does provide educational benefits and experience to the volunteers so they are in a sense getting a payment. College credit may be given with the permission of the local theatre arts department.

If the theatre is operating on a very restricted budget, the use of apprentices can be a great advantage. The disadvantages involved are those which plague any volunteer program, the inability to hold the volunteer responsible for his work. Some states and especially organizations such as Equity have laws and restrictions which may be placed on the number of volunteers and the type of work they can do.⁷⁸

Of the successful theatres surveyed, only 22 percent used unpaid apprentices. All of the others paid their entire staffs. This statistic indicates that apprentice positions are not as desirable as they may look on paper.

PRODUCTION

⁷⁸Actors' Equity Association, Agreement, pp. 32-34.

The performances themselves are of the greatest importance to any professional theatre. Several factors may be considered when planning and rehearsing productions to help assure a successful run.

Theatrical Performances

Theatrically the performances can vary in style and presentational format. The choice of presentation may to a great extent affect the outcome. If an inappropriately chosen production is presented, it can cause adverse publicity for the rest of the season.

Comedy. Comedies ranging from farces to situation-comedies to comedies of manners are often the fare of dinner theatres. Dinner theatre audiences are seeking light entertainment, and most people find this in comedy. Audiences tend to be more receptive to light humor than to other types of productions. Approximately two-thirds (67 percent) of the successful theatres surveyed emphasize comedies in their seasonal planning. When including all of the responding theatres, this percentage rises to 72 percent.

Drama. As was stated earlier, serious drama does not hold as strong a place in the dinner theatre repertory. It is the province of resident theatres committed to more serious works of a less commercial nature, but this is not to say it should be avoided or never done. Of all surveyed theatres, only 7 percent indicated production of dramas and an additional 7 percent indicated production of dramas in conjunction with other types of plays such as musicals. Good taste and audience analysis should always be used in selecting anything for the theatre, but given these two variables, a drama can conceivably work quite well in the production schedule.

Musical. Musical productions are ones which rely heavily upon the use

of music, singing and dancing. They may range from musical comedies to operettas to musical dramas. Musicals have always drawn large crowds compared to the other types of American theatre. This is the reason they are so frequently done (in particular in Broadway, commercial theatre) and why they are so expensive in comparison to royalties of a regular, nonmusical play. The disadvantage of performing musicals involves hiring an orchestra or musicians and working with the extra problems music can engender as well as casting singers and dancers in addition to straight actors. Musicals also tend to use extravagant scenery relying heavily on the element of spectacle. These productions can be expensive in terms of the budget, although there are ways of producing musicals inexpensively, such as the use of a piano instead of an orchestra.

Balanced against all of the disadvantages is the overwhelming advantage which can be realized at the box office. It is an unquestionable fact that musicals will draw crowds (all other factors and variables considered). Of the theatres surveyed, 14 percent presented musicals, 36 percent presented musicals combined with comedies and 7 percent presented musicals and dramas. This makes a grand total of 57 percent presenting musicals within a given season. Because of the aforementioned disadvantages, it is a good idea to present a limited number of musicals in a given season and to add variety by filling the rest of the production slots with other types of plays, farces, comedies, and even a serious drama or two. This type of programming balances the season plan as well as allowing for a musical production without the continuous commitment of nonstop musical productions. Some theatres are committed strictly to the production of musicals. This is an unwise idea for the beginning dinner theatre unless it can be assured of financial success despite

higher operation costs.

Number of performances. The possible times for dinner theatre productions are mealtimes, occurring possibly every night and every afternoon for the lunch crowd. This schedule allows a possible 14 performances a week. This number is, of course, totally impractical. It would involve tremendous production costs not to mention salaries of performers willing to work on such a heavy production schedule. Most dinner theatres operate in the evenings only with the possibility of one matinee on the weekend. Of the evening performances, these are generally restricted to five or six per week. Half of the theatres surveyed performed five to six times totally per week, one-fourth performed three to four times per week and the other fourth performed seven or more times per week. A typical number of performances is indicated at five shows per week, generally covering the weekend and the week nights directly preceding it.

Length of run. The number of productions can be increased or decreased depending upon the length of time each one runs. While 58 percent of the theatres surveyed ran one production for three to six weeks, 33 percent ran productions seven to twelve weeks. If a theatre ran one production for five nights a week for six weeks, this amounts to thirty performances of each production. This number of performances will permit a season of six productions giving approximately two or three weeks between shows for scenery construction and rehearsals.

Program. The way in which each production is presented to the public may have an influencing factor on the acceptance of the theatre. One style of programming would involve having a general theme to the theatre. This theme may be in décor or design of the building, such as a title of

the theatre may suggest (for example, the Barn Dinner Theatre); or the theme may be realized through the style of productions chosen. The latter case is usually done in resort areas where productions may run primarily in one style, such as the exclusive production of 1890's melo-dramas or only musical comedies. Of the total theatres surveyed 75 per-cent did not use any theme in décor or production style. When only the successful theatres were considered this percentage rose to 78 percent who did not use a theme.

Another form of programming is the use of pre-show entertainment. One theatre attended by this author featured a half hour of singing and comedy routines performed by the waiters and waitresses to warm up the audience for the production. Fifty eight percent of the theatres sur-veyed did not use any pre-show entertainment. Of the 42 percent offering pre-show entertainment, only 20 percent said it was provided by their waiters and waitresses.

Perhaps the most important element of programming is the initial planning and booking of the season. Much has already been said regarding the styles and types of productions to be considered. If the producer chooses a variety of styles of production, he will have a wider audience appeal. If guest artists and directors are to be used, then seasonal booking becomes important in trying to work around their schedules and commitments. This problem is also the major concern of Equity theatres where actors with heavily committed schedules are involved. Another choice regarding seasonal planning and booking is the ability to book package shows. These are touring productions which will come into a theatre for a limited run and bring with them scenery and actors, etc. Problems can arise with packages such as a lack of control over the

performance presented and the adaptability of the production to the existing theatre and audience. The final element to consider in seasonal planning is preparing a season which will not significantly conflict with similar productions presented at other local theatres.

Quality Control

The quality of both food and entertainment provided must be excellent. These two important factors keep an audience satisfied and willing to return in the future. Anything less tends to disappoint the audience and send them away with bad feelings about wasting their money and time. Quality must therefore be maintained. Exerting a direct influence on quality control are critics, the community and the audience.

The critic. Critics are people paid to notice what is good and what is bad so they can make a public statement advising others about spending their time and money. It is advisable to attempt to stay on the good side of critics, but this does not mean bribery should be used to obtain favorable reviews. Theatres usually give critics free admission to each production since they in turn provide free publicity. They should be treated with the same basic consideration as any patron or audience member. They have a moral obligation to print the truth as they see the production. Most critics are skilled in the arts they critique, which gives them some basis for a realistic value judgement. They, however, are not the last word in theatre. Although professionally a bad review can seriously hurt the box office, it does not necessarily mean the show should close immediately. If, however, the critic is honest and talented, the producer should welcome the critical observations and attempt to use them to his advantage in perfecting the production.

The community. The community where the theatre is located can have a strong effect upon the productions. Plays which will appeal to the community are usually chosen with this potential clientele in mind. The values of surveying the community likes and dislikes in establishing a dinner theatre have been discussed earlier, (see pages 10 to 27) and need to be reviewed by producers who are selecting plays for the season. One item of interest was the report of a theatre which opened in Salt Lake City, Utah. It supposedly was a multi-million dollar establishment which closed very shortly after it had opened because "the producers had misjudged their audience."⁷⁹ Of course, this story is totally hearsay information based on gossip of theatre people, but it does illustrate the point of a community's influence upon a theatre.

The audience. The audience can exert the strongest influence of all on the quality of the productions offered. If audience members do not like either the performance or the food provided, chances are they will not return. There are methods to help preserve the quality control of the audience. Without waiting to see if the wrong choices have been made simply because the audience dwindles from show to show, audience surveys and opinion polls may be used in advance. The questionnaires secure audience input while giving the respondent the feeling of importance and worth.⁸⁰ An audience analysis is also beneficial in order to determine what type of people attend the theatre and what types of productions are of the most interest to them.

The Restaurant

The food is the first official contact the audience has with the

⁷⁹Butler, personal interview.

⁸⁰Langley, p. 284.

products of a dinner theatre. It must be of good quality, served and prepared in the best possible way in order to assure excellence. If an audience member has unpleasant experiences with the food, he or she will be in an unhappy frame of mind to accept the performance which follows.

Equipment and supplies. In the section dealing with personnel, this author stated that an excellent chef is vital to the operation of a dinner theatre. A talented chef prepares the menus appropriate for the various productions, which dictate the supplies, foodstuffs and equipment needed for preparation. Such items as slicers, blenders, cookers, stoves, ovens, freezers, coolers, and a host of small utensils are required.

In most dinner theatres (73 percent) the waiters and waitresses are simply hired to serve drinks, act as hosts and clear tables. The audience members serve themselves through a buffet line. This procedure takes less time and causes less confusion. However, in 27 percent of the theatres contacted the waiters and waitresses did actually serve the meals to the audience members. When the meals are served buffet style, this entails further equipment needs, such as movable buffet tables, whereas the other procedure, while cutting equipment expenses, causes higher staff expenses.

In supplying a kitchen facility for a dinner theatre, expense is often incurred. One restaurant supplier in Lincoln, Nebraska, estimated approximately \$50,000 was needed to equip the theatre for a seating capacity of 200.⁸¹ However, the figure was not restricted specifically to the kitchen facility alone, but also took into account equipping the

⁸¹Based on personal correspondence between Mr. Robert S. Benton, Vice President of Pegler & Company, Lincoln, Nebraska, and the writer, February 28, 1978.

theatre with all restaurant needs such as tables, chairs, dishes, utensils, and linens.

Menu planning and serving. Menu planning is usually the province of the chef, under the ultimate direction of the producer. Menus often change from production to production, but usually remain stable throughout the course of one show's run. Most menus offer a choice of salads, two or three entrees, vegetables, breads and desserts. Examples of entrees served by some theatres include the following: roast beef, veal cutlet, sirloin steak, prime rib, seafood newberg, and other specialty dishes. These types of foods take much more time and preparation than do hot dogs and hamburgers. Such "fast food" items are unacceptable unless the theatre is doing special matinee performances of a children's production and needs a specialized menu for the occasion. The food in a dinner theatre must normally rival the best quality food obtainable in any upper class restaurant within the community.

Depending upon the talents of the chef, another aspect of menu planning is the use of specialty items, which are good "attention getting" devices. Any house specialty in food and/or drink should be well publicized. In one particular theatre in Kansas City the menu may vary from show to show, but it always includes some form of dessert fritters advertised as a food specialty. In the same theatre various drinks are given novelty names for specialty effect in hopes of eliciting the customers' response. In this instance a mai-tai drink was called a "Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.", with a nonalcoholic drink of similar flavor called the "Douglas Fairbanks, Jr."

Liquor. The average price for mixed drinks in dinner theatres is approximately \$1.50. Liquor sales bring in an estimated 33 percent of

the theatre's income. Liquor sales form a substantial part of the total revenue and are an important part of any professional situation. In addition to numerous types of mixed drinks, a well stocked bar, and wines appropriate to the dinners offered, the dinner theatre needs a competent bartender.

Restaurant budgets. Once the initial investment is made to set up the restaurant of the theatre, the only budgeted items involve a continual stocking of expendable supply items. Occasional cleaning and repair bills can be budgeted under general equipment expenses. Each production should allocate a portion of its budget to the food and drink needs for the performances involved. A typical allocation for food supplies for a 30-performance production in a dinner theatre holding a seating capacity of 150 is \$14,000.⁸²

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public relations include the comfortable and satisfactory treatment of the audience by the theatre staff. It is the domain of the publicity director, house manager, and box office staff. Even before the audience members have a chance to taste the cuisine of the establishment or view its dramatic talents, the audience members are met and greeted by staff members through purchasing tickets, reading press releases and being finally seated at a table. The staff members involved must take extra precautions that the audiences' pre-show experiences put them in a receptive frame of mind and help spread the feeling of good will.

⁸²Prepared by the author in cooperation with Mr. Bruce Hyland, candidate for Masters in Business Administration, Emporia State University.

Treatment of the Audience

As the audience members and patrons come into the theatre they must receive specialized treatment from each staff member with whom they come in contact. This begins from the moment they make their reservations right up to the moment they leave the theatre to return home. Attendant facilities such as the exterior of the building with parking lots and sidewalks will not be again discussed, but doormen and parking attendants add a measure of elegance to be considered.

Reservation procedures. Reservations should be as easy as possible to make. The audience members should be asked all the appropriate questions by the box office staff after being pleasantly greeted. The patron must never have to think of what to tell the reservation manager, but only answer the simple questions regarding what night and how many seats will be required.

Most professional theatres reserve tickets for a limited period of time (usually 48 hours) to allow the patron to mail a check in payment, or to pick the tickets up in person. An unwise policy for theatres to follow is to reserve seats unconditionally and not release them until performance time if not paid for. When this method is used large numbers of tickets may be unclaimed at performance time and these are potential sales. All reservations should be paid for in advance or claimed prior to performance time to avoid financial problems such as the one described above.

Seating and table arrangements. Properly arranged tables in the theatre on stairstep terraces provide good visibility for all customers. In this situation poor seats are eliminated, and there is no need for a price differentiation within a small house, the type discussed within this

report. All seats are approximately of equal value. Tables are best arranged which hold patrons in multiples of two, as most audience members come to a social theatre of this type with someone rather than by themselves. Couple tables should be available as should a number of tables seating four and a number seating six. Large group tables can be made by combining smaller ones easily enough, but it is financially impractical to sell a large table to a group who does not fill it, especially when other customers are turned away.

One theatre box office contacted by the writer explained its policy of selling tables only to multiples of two on weekends and other busy nights. If a group of three wanted to purchase a table they would have to pay four full admissions or else find a fourth member for the party. In this way the theatre would not allow any seats to be wasted. Also, single seats were not sold. This policy can, of course, be modified and varied for slower nights when there is a distinct possibility of empty seats existing. This policy can also irritate people and alienate them altogether.

Special audience conditions. At times conditions will arise which demand specialized treatment. These conditions should be anticipated in advance, if at all possible, to avoid last minute or on-the-spot emergencies. One such condition is the possibility of a banquet being requested, which involves a large group sale or even the possibility of a completely sold out house for one night. If banquet arrangements are requested, they may or may not desire a production. At times banquets merely require a dining hall in which to be held; and if the theatre has excellent food services, it may be graced with such requests. For most banquets large table combinations are desired rather than tables for two and four,

splitting up the groups.

Group bookings are similar to banquets. In this instance the group, be it civic organization, private or social club, may desire a blanket number of tickets to facilitate their attending en masse. The usual procedure is to offer a discount for large groups when they are reserved together and paid in advance. All of the theatres in this survey followed this discount procedure.

So far, throughout this study, the term patron has been used synonymously with audience member. In some theatres, a patron list is established to recognize certain individuals who have assisted the theatre in special ways, usually monetarily. Only a small percentage (17 percent) of the professional theatres have such lists, which is a more prevalent policy with academic and nonprofit theatres. If patrons are established, however, their status may entitle them to some form of preferred treatment in comparison to the rest of the audience. If this is the case, the producer must decide what the preferred treatment is to be. It may only be the courtesy of having their names inscribed or posted where they are plainly visible to the rest of the audience, such as on the back of the program. Or the patron status may entitle the patron to a discount on his or her tickets for the theatre, as well as placing him/her on a mailing list for special publicity, announcements and newsletters.

How the staff handles a sold-out house is also a matter of policy to be determined. A refund or exchange policy may be placed upon reservations in which case it would be possible for the house to be sold out but for there still to be a number of possible cancellations. General policies are to sell last minute cancellations to people who have placed

their names on waiting lists and also show up for the performance in hopes of obtaining admission. A sold-out house is the type of special audience problem which is enjoyed by producers. The box office staff should attempt to sell the earliest available seats to the customers who have requested seating in a sold-out house. The customers may then purchase seats and provide advanced publicity about the popularity of the performances by word of mouth.

Another condition which should be anticipated, but which is an undesirable situation, is the extremely small house. Because of numerous circumstances which include adverse weather, conflicting events, poor publicity or bad reviews, the audience may be extremely small for a given performance. In a regular theatre the box office staff attempts to "dress" the house to make it look larger than it is in reality. This effect is achieved by spreading the people out over a greater area and leaving isolated seats throughout the auditorium. In a dinner theatre dressing the house does not work well because the empty tables take up such a large space and obviously stand out among the filled ones more so than a few empty seats in an auditorium.

Some solutions to the small house problems are to provide partitions in the house area in order to make it smaller if the audience is small. Movable walls are an advantage in shrinking the empty house as well as providing banquet rooms which are semi-private for other affairs at other times. Another solution is to remove the unoccupied tables and chairs and spread out the existing ones, which gives more room in the theatre and eliminates empty spots. Of course, this technique works only if the tables are not permanently affixed to the floor.

Emergency evacuation procedures for fires and other emergencies

should be planned. In the event that the theatre needs to be quickly evacuated, emergency exits must be easily accessible and obvious. The staff should be trained in how to facilitate the evacuation with efficiency and as calmly as possible. If the theatre is located in an area prone to weather emergencies such as tornadoes in the Midwest, or hurricanes on the coast lines, special shelters should be provided which can house the audience temporarily until the emergency has passed.

The audience related staff. Any staff members who have continuous contact with the audience must be briefed in public relations and theatre policy so they can appear knowledgeable and friendly. Making the audience members feel comfortable is a primary requirement for the staff members. The first contact the audience members have is probably made through the reservation procedure. If a telephone staff is hired, they must be efficient and pleasant over the telephone. The box office staff must be courteous and efficient. Also, they must appear business-like so the customer will feel confident in handing his money to them.

The house manager is the person responsible for the customers' comfort once they enter the theatre. The house manager should greet and welcome all the customers, if possible, and be on hand to offer any assistance and answer any questions necessary. The house manager is usually in charge of the ushers in the theatre. If there is any problem with seating or mistakes, the house manager must be able to solve it with calmness and to the satisfaction of the customer. A certain number of tables should be reserved as house seats to take care of such emergencies that might arise and to be used by the house manager in reassigning a table.

In dinner theatres the majority of businesses use ushers only as

ushers. A small number also use cast members, or waiters and waitresses to double as ushers. In some situations where such doubling is practical, it can benefit the theatre financially by reducing the number of people on the payroll.

The waiters in a majority of dinner theatres only serve drinks and take special orders for the customers. They may also clear tables after the dinner is completed. In a limited number of theatres they serve the meal, but in a theatre restaurant this is not usually the case.

Community ties and resources. In order for the theatre to be accepted into a community, the producer and his staff must become involved with the community. Several community ties should be established. Community leaders should be solicited as patrons. These people are able to assist the theatre in times of need and are the clientele sought. They can provide excellent word of mouth publicity if they are avid patrons and enjoy the theatre, not to mention bringing their guests on occasion.

Another community tie would be the establishment of an advisory board of community members. Such a committee gives community people an input in advising the theatre about policy, production schedules and types of plays presented. They do not have to have any strong power other than that of advisors whose advice can be followed or not at the discretion of the producer.

The producer himself should become involved in the community. Joining various organizations such as Chambers of Commerce or civic groups like the Rotary Club, etc. can be of aid. The theatre staff must also present their best image to the community members they contact. An irate customer in the community can create thousands of dollars worth of

negative publicity.⁸³

Resources of the community fall into three categories. The first of these is the human resource area. People are needed to staff the theatre and to attend it. They may be drawn from the community which can provide a resource in this way. If the human resources are well exploited, a potential audience will be secured from the community.

Material resources are the second obvious resources within the community. Purchasing local materials aids the reputation of the theatre by generating business for local establishments. These businesses and firms are likely to reciprocate. Nothing can alienate a producer and his theatre more than a continual practice of purchasing, banking, and hiring in other towns.

The final category is communication. Local publicity avenues should be used to communicate with the human resources of the community through the use of newspapers, television, radio, telephone and even word of mouth.

Publicity

The single factor of publicity determines to a great extent the success of the theatre by attracting an audience. If the theatre, the season, and the individual shows are all well-publicized, an audience will be attracted initially. The theatre itself in terms of quality of fare must win the audience's favor to ensure them as continual patrons. But, the initial attraction is due mainly to publicity campaigns.

Opening publicity for the theatre. When the theatre is first to open, special efforts must be made to attract as much attention as possible.

⁸³Langley, p. 280.

Since it has not been in existence before, producers cannot count on the regular customers attending or others even knowing there is something to attend. For this reason an abundant publicity budget should be allocated.

Some mention has already been made of community resources which can be used to publicize the theatre, namely the newspaper, radio, television, and so forth. Catchy advertisements must be designed which will make the average listener take note and become curious about this new opportunity available to him or her. In addition to pumping money into these standard areas, an opening theatre should try any number of other one time publicity gimmicks to attract attention. Such things as sky-writing or notes in helium filled balloons are not out of the question. One major publicity campaign which should provide a large amount of free press coverage as well as word of mouth publicity is to host a free invitational pre-opening performance and dinner for a list of VIP's in the community. Such people as the mayor, councilmen, governor, civic leaders, rich and influential businessmen, as well as members of the local media services and critics should be included. Research to compile such a list may take some time and effort, but the results make the work well worthwhile if the people enjoy themselves. If, on the other hand, the evening fails and the invited guests have a less than pleasant time, this campaign may be the fastest way to ensure the immediate failure of the theatre.

Not enough can be said about publicity coverage. Once the theatre is established and has built up a regular clientele and a reputation, publicity can be cut back somewhat to a maintenance program to inform patrons of forthcoming and current productions. Until that time is reached, however, the more coverage the theatre receives, the better.

Maintenance publicity on each show. Once the theatre is going strong, the publicity for each show becomes a matter of procedure. On given dates certain deadlines are established; and if they are carried out, the publicity will be completed. Such things to schedule include press releases, printing schedules, interviews with the media, poster distributions, commercial distributions, ads run, photos taken, and so on. This sort of maintenance campaign works well as a basis for the publicity of a show, but should not be thought as the ultimate goal of any publicity. Each time a novel gimmick or presentation can be added or inserted into the regular campaign, potential audience members may take note, their attention having been caught by something out of the ordinary.

Media coverage. On television, radio and in the newspapers, ads or air time costs money. Whenever an ad is purchased it should be well designed and conceived. A well planned ad avoids the classic problem with many locally produced commercials which insult the audience's intelligence and engender bad feelings, rather than fulfilling their original purpose. Such ads are wasted money on unproductive time or space; ad coverage which is well used is worth every cent. Another way to use the media, and not have to pay for the space or time, is by using press releases or interviews. In this way the information regarding the theatre or productions can be presented as a feature article or as news items. It then becomes the responsibility of the media to cover the productions as news items or community service items. Thus, free publicity can be received.

Printing. The use of printing in publicity is essential. Three different items are printed for theatres. The first is a poster. A poster is usually a design for the season or a particular production which

is then printed on cardboard or heavy stock paper and displayed in various locations. Local merchants, community bulletin boards and so forth are good places to distribute posters for any theatre. Any locations where people are likely to see the posters are good places, particularly restaurants and other entertainment-related establishments. It may be of interest to note that none of the theatres surveyed use posters, but all use newspaper ads.

Fliers and handbills are usually printed on lighter weight paper. These can be mailed to people, passed out on street corners, or distributed in other ways to the public. The handbill will act as a brief reminder to the public about the production. A major problem with using handbills is the mess they can cause when left on the streets to blow into gutters. The theatre staff must be careful to avoid breaking any litter laws and be willing to clean up any mess it may cause.

The final element of printing is the program for each production. Programs generally advertise one show and all the people involved in its production. They are not useful in advertising a production to the general public before they arrive at the theatre unless previously attending theatre-goers accidentally leave programs laying about town after the performances. In the program, however, many times there is ample space to print advertisements for forthcoming productions. Also, ad space may exist for other businesses around town. Businesses may be solicited to pay for ad space in the program, which will assist with the publicity budget and possibly pay for the programs to be printed.

Marquees, signs and displays. Before any large visible signs may be displayed city ordinances, zoning rules and other laws should be carefully checked. The theatre should avoid spending a large amount of

money on such type of publicity only to find it has to be removed immediately because of laws. Signs and displays may be set up in many different locations. Billboards can oftentimes be rented from advertising agencies and be used to display the season, theatre or production along well traveled routes. Marquees are usually lighted signs attached to the outside of the building and which advertise the current production. If done tastefully these can be very theatrical.

Free announcements. Free publicity has been mentioned by using news and press releases to advertise the show in papers and on other media. In addition to these sources there are always community schedules of events, local bulletin boards, public service announcements, and other services which are free. Many universities may also have campus news services, memos to the students, and other methods of advertising events free of charge. There are also public address systems in dormitories, student unions, bus stations and grocery stores, which can provide free services.

Box Office

As in publicity, the way the box office staff handles their business and the customers can have a strong influence upon the success of the theatre. The box office staff must also be well versed in public relations.

The reservation process. The reservation process has already been dealt with from the customer's point of view. With regards to the box office staff, they must be courteous and efficient. When taking reservations, the box office personnel must get the necessary information and note it clearly and easily. Such questions as name, date, number of seats, phone number and method of payment are essential. With a dinner theatre the box office attendant should not ask the party where they would like

to be seated. If the customer has attended before and wants a particular table, he/she will make it known. Seating charts are somewhat impractical when dealing with tables and chairs rather than auditorium seats.

When the box office is not open for business the hours should be posted so customers know when to return. Box offices should always be open over lunch and other "break" times when business people may be able to stop in to reserve a table. The telephone should be staffed as long as the box office is open. At other times an answering service or recording device may be used to announce the shows, box office hours and other pertinent information.

Management of the box office. The box office manager is important to the financial success of the theatre. He/she must be an honest and accurate person. Many times this task is undertaken or at least overseen by the treasurer or business manager. The manager must be able to make and enforce all box office policies necessary and be able to use them in direct dealings with the customers. He is the one who should always be responsible for closing the books each evening. The box office manager must be selective and careful about his staff. If a box office worker is not efficient, makes many errors, is abusive to the public or dishonest, he/she must be discharged immediately.

Money transactions. A cash register must be kept to accurately record all money transactions. The box office staff must remember that each ticket or reservation card is equivalent to the printed price and must therefore be treated as if it has the same value. Each day's business must begin with a set amount of change. Each night the money should be sent directly to the bank, preferably under police escort or armed guard.

A safe should be provided to store the miscellaneous cash and next day's change.

Most customers are cautious about their money. The box office personnel must present an honest and efficient front to the customers to put them at ease. All change should be carefully counted out for the customers. Checks should be accepted for the amount of purchase only. Tickets. In a regular theatre tickets are printed for each seat and crossed off of a seating chart when sold, which is not practical in a dinner theatre. Instead of individual seats, tickets or reservation cards should be made for tables. Individually priced seats can then be combined depending on how many the table will seat. When the customer purchases a table for four, he may be given a ticket with the specific table number on it and pay the price of four admissions. He and his party will then be escorted to that table on the night of performance, leaving the individual seating arrangement up to them.

Tickets should be kept well-organized in racks. A seating chart for the use of the box office personnel showing tables and the numbers they will seat should be carefully and clearly marked. When tickets are given out they should be distributed in small envelopes, just as in other theatres. In such a case, the customer's name can be taken and filled in on the seating chart under the table. Thus, if tickets are lost, an entire table is not altogether missing or confused and can be easily recovered for the customer.

Pricing of dinner theatre seats is another important issue. It should take into account the economic factors of the community; the budget needs of the theatre, the competition, and the price involved in preparation of the food. A good rule of thumb is to price the food at

approximately what it would cost in a regular restaurant. Then added to this amount the price is figured in for a professional production. Dinner theatre is expensive, but the customer is getting two services for his money. Of those theatres questioned, half charged \$10 to \$13, one-third (30 percent) charged \$14 to \$18, and one-fifth (20 percent) charged \$5 to \$9. The optimum price range is approximately \$12. This price is not as expensive as \$15 and above, nor is it as cheap (for quality entertainment) as \$10 and below.

Accounting. Many accounting methods may be employed depending on the desires of the box office manager, the treasurer, and the business manager. The theatre is fortunate if all three are the same person. Various forms are suggested in the appendixes of Stephen Langley's Theatre Management text.⁸⁴ These accounting methods are examined more closely in the financial section of this study.

Season tickets and seasonal planning. Advanced capital may be raised by the sale of season tickets. Subscriptions entitle a customer to attend each of the different productions given during the season and may be sold in different ways. One idea is to sell specific tables bundled into booklets for a specific night of each production. The drawback to this method is that customers may not know what they are planning far enough in advance to commit themselves to specific nights months away. Another method is to provide a coupon which can be punched in exchange for seats. The customer may use this in any way he desires and at any time as long as there is advance notice to reserve seats for the desired night.

The advantage to the customer is a small discount on the admission

⁸⁴Langley, pp. 370-386.

price. Usually one entire production is given away free, or one admission if the coupon or ticket represents a table with several admissions. The advantage to the theatre is a larger amount of income early in the season as well as reservations for the distant future filling up houses throughout the season.

In this chapter several different methods of operation have been investigated and explained. Much of the information has been slanted toward the methods used by existing theatres. As always, the prospective producer is free to follow or disregard any advice given herein. However, the procedures outlined in this report apparently are the ones resulting in the financial success of many dinner theatre operations.

Chapter 5

FINANCES

Theatre is an expensive business. It is also a gamble. A person attempting such an enterprise should be prepared to lose everything financially.⁸⁵ With this ominous warning taken into account, ways must be devised to pay for the theatre. The first step is finding the finances and once under operation, the theatre must continue to show a profit. Every cent involved should be tightly controlled by a carefully planned budget, which is the job of the producer and business manager working in close cooperation.

COST ESTIMATING FOR SET UP

Itemized planning must be detailed in the initial budget including such items as capital expenses and operating budgets. These expenses often run very high with the opening of the theatre. Capital expenses are those which are made only once, such as the original price paid for the equipment of the theatre. Once capital expenses are taken care of, the items purchased with the money then become assets of the business. Although capital items may indeed boost the initial need for money, they have a hidden advantage in that the money is only required one time. Operational expenses are generally needed only to cover the

⁸⁵Statement by Gary Carton in class lecture, Emporia State University, February 13, 1978.

time until the theatre can start selling tickets and taking in revenue. In a successful theatre operation expenses are returned through the box office.

Table 3 (Appendix A) listing all items to be considered when setting up a dinner theatre, also includes an estimated budget amount for each item. These budgets are based on a number of estimates gathered from numerous sources, most of which have already been cited elsewhere in this report. All budgeted amounts and salary estimations were compiled with the aid of Mr. Bruce Hyland, a graduate student in the department of Business at Emporia State University. This table includes both the capital expenses and a budget for recurring expenses which are fixed items on a yearly basis. The item titled "Production Cost Per Show" is an estimated amount for flexible budget items which will vary from show to show. It cannot be taken as a set amount because of the variety of any proposed season.

When asked the question, "How much would you estimate it would cost a typical dinner theatre to begin operation in a community such as yours, including all opening expenses such as renovations to the building, hiring the staff as well as the opening show budget?" respondents answered in a large range. The most conservative estimate was \$25,000, and the most generous amount was \$1.25 million. An average amount calculated from the varying estimates is \$513,888.88. The table in the appendix uses rounded figures of this estimation with a total budget allocation of \$500,000.

OPENING BUDGET

The budget for the opening show, as with all production budgets

dealing with flexible budget items, is strongly dependent upon productions chosen. For example, a musical production will have a larger budget need because of increased expenses involved in royalties and musical payments. Depending upon the popularity of the show, or how new it is, royalties will vary. Table 4 in Appendix A shows a typical estimated budget for the production of a musical comedy. Generally speaking, a nonmusical production should be considerably cheaper.

ESTIMATING INCOME

In order for the producer to better plan the theatre budget, he must have some idea of how much money it can take in. One way to do this is to estimate the income. Income can be estimated by taking all of the revenue producing items such as ticket sales and drink sales and estimating what they will be during a given production or for a given season.

Ticket Sales

Ticket pricing was discussed, in a previous section, and the average price for dinner theatre was suggested at \$12 per person. An average house capacity has also been estimated at 150. For a theatre of this size selling a capacity audience, an estimated gross income would be \$1,800 per night or \$54,000 for a 30 performance run, which is, of course, an optimum figure. During the course of a production, a producer cannot expect that every single night will be completely sold out. Also, if large theatre parties book group reservations at a discount, this will lower the possible income. If the theatre sells approximately two-thirds of its seating for any run, as estimated by

Marcia Feldman, then the possible gross would be \$35,640.⁸⁶ With a production budget at \$35,150 the theatre would break even. However, this figure does not take into account taxes and other necessary deductions from the gross income.

The survey indicated that 36 percent of the theatres sold half to three-fourths of their capacity for a successful run, while three-fourths to full capacity was sold by 64 percent of the theatres. These figures give a better outlook than the prediction by Ms. Feldman. At three-fourths of capacity a gross income per production could be \$40,500. This figure is more realistic and encouraging if the producer hopes to make money on his venture. At this rate, the yearly profit beyond production budgets would be \$32,100, enough money to produce another production.

Patron Donations

The previously computed figures are not the most pleasing if the producer has visions of a lucrative business. However, they are taking into account only a small part of the possible revenue for the dinner theatre. If the income from ticket sales alone is enough to make the theatre profitable, albeit on a slim margin, one can imagine what the advantages are to dinner theatre when other revenue sources are added to these figures.

According to the survey few theatres have a patron list; but of those which do, one theatre asked patrons to contribute \$100 apiece. Patrons are often on special lists because of their monetary contributions to the theatre. If the theatre is a nonprofit organization, the

⁸⁶Feldman, p. 42.

fact that the donations are tax deductible may attract more patrons. If the theatre is a profit seeking establishment, then patrons may donate money because of the prestige involved in giving money to the arts or because of the advantages offered to the patrons by way of preferred treatment, seating, or other considerations.

Seasonal Sales

Selling of season tickets is a mixed blessing. Early in the season these sales will provide greater revenue and help to fill distant future houses. At the first this appears to be a monetary advantage; and early in the season when much capital may be needed to finance the first production, the large income is useful. However, later in the season the use of season tickets and coupons results in houses filled, but not with audience members who are contributing to the immediate revenue with ticket sales. In a successful venture the advantages of the season ticket offset any financial disadvantages by the volume of sales these can generate.

Other Revenue Items

Other revenue items which sometimes occur in a non-dinner theatre often exist in a dinner theatre. These items are the mainstay of dinner theatres and are helpful in maintaining a successful financial balance. Liquor. One of the main sources of revenue, aside from ticket sales, is the sale of liquor. Mixed drinks and wines are usually not included in the admission price of the theatre as is the meal. The customers who wish to imbibe must, therefore, pay additionally for their drinks. In the social atmosphere of the theatre and restaurant combined, drinking seems to be a natural course. So, the customers add greatly to the

gross income by purchasing drinks.

The questionnaire revealed that only a small percentage of the theatres responded with any candor to the financial questions making the validity of the information dependent upon the small sample involved. But of the responding theatres, ticket sales generated an average 63 percent of the total income. With an additional 12.5 percent generated by season sales, the total income related to ticket sales was 75.5 percent leaving a substantial amount to other items. Patron donations were 2.5 percent and liquor sales contributed 16.25 percent.

Advertising space. Advertising space may be sold in the programs for each production. This practice often pays for the printing costs of the programs, thereby eliminating a large amount from the production budget. Advertising space accounted for 3.25 percent of the total revenue of the responding theatres.

Miscellaneous revenue items. This category amounted to only 2.5 percent of the total revenue. This small amount should not be discounted totally. Miscellaneous revenue items include such things as special performances, souvenir sales, selling cast record albums in the lobby, color photo books, printed T-shirts, and other such production mementos. This category includes any revenue from the use of the coat room, although this service is usually free for the guests of the theatre; and if they tip the attendant, the theatre may not take this amount as revenue.

Special matinee performances may be given on weekends of a children's theatre production. A menu for such a production may include such fast food items as hot dogs and hamburgers which would be fairly inexpensive for the budget and something that would appeal to a child audience. Another suggestion is the offering of a special

revue or olio production given after the regular performance. This would be presented for a midnight crowd after the theatre had been cleared from the regular production. Drinks could be offered, but no meal served.

Nonprofit theatres are often initially funded by donations and grants from state, federal or local governments or by funding from private industry. This factor was not seriously considered since this study primarily deals with professional theatres as opposed to nonprofit organizations. However, even for a nonprofit organization, the granting institutions rarely give funds unless the theatre can satisfactorily project a financial future demonstrating its ability to become self-sustaining. Grants are best used to make capital purchases and to set up the theatre with production budgets, while recurring expenses are provided for from income sources such as ticket sales.

PROJECTING PROFITS AND DEFICITS

The amount needed to break even is approximately \$35,000 per production which meets all of the production costs for the show. However, this sum would not allow the theatre to show any profit in the long run because no resources would be built up to take care of the yearly expenditure in the fixed operation budget. Using Table 3 (in Appendix A) as a guideline for such a fixed operational budget, the amount of money needed yearly to pay for fixed items above the amount of the production costs is approximately \$153,000. This figure was concluded by dropping such items as equipment and renovations and by rounding down considerably items such as permits and licenses, legal fees, and miscellaneous expenses which would all drop after the theatre has been

operating for some time. This amount, in addition to the production budgets for six shows, gives a grand total of \$363,712, the yearly expenses. A yearly income based on three-fourths capacity houses would be \$243,000, not enough to break even.

Based on ticket returns in order to break even financially, a theatre needs to sell 113 percent of its house per performance, which is an impossibility. If, however, the estimate that ticket revenue is only three-fourths of the entire income, these figures change drastically. The total income for a capacity house crowd at every performance can then be boosted to \$514,285 or \$150,573 above the break even point. Using these figures, theatres need only sell about 71 percent to break even financially. At 75 percent sales there is still a net profit of \$22,002. Based on previously researched information, it can be assumed that 75 percent will be a fairly reliable figure upon which to base these calculations, allowing for the \$22,000 profit margin per year.

COST CONTROL

Even if a projected profit is shown, costs must be very carefully controlled. If this is done, the profit margin may be significantly increased because of decreased, unnecessary spending. The best tool for cost control is the use of a carefully designed budget. One such budget is found on Table 3 and can be used to give ideas for monetary allocations. A budget should not be considered final until every single item on it can be matched with a price estimate from a series of quotes from suppliers, businessmen, officials and other persons involved. The budget should be carefully constructed by conferences between the producer and the business manager. Once the budget is set, strict adherence

to it, allowing for only the smallest deviations in cases of dire emergency, will help the theatre stay within its financial goals.

The business manager should be involved in all financial transactions of any importance. His duties include such things as box office management, banking, insurance, budgeting, purchasing, taxes, payroll, accounting, fulfilling contract and license obligations, and union negotiations and contracts.⁸⁷ The business manager should have a check system in his accounting method to approve every purchase and expenditure for the theatre. A popular system involves the use of requisitions and purchase orders. Any well versed business manager is knowledgeable in accounting and is able to set up the accounts for the theatre which involve the budget and all checks and balances needed to allow them to work. A bookkeeper may do the actual work, but should not be substituted for the business manager.

It is not within the scope of this thesis to give detailed explanations of accounting procedures and methods. Any good business or accounting text should be able to provide this procedure. However, another helpful source is Stephen Langley's Theatre Management text. The appendixes of this volume include sample box office accounting forms in addition to many tips within the book proper concernign the ways of generating revenue and controlling costs.⁸⁸

⁸⁷Langley, p. 208.

⁸⁸Langley, pp. 370-394.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS

Based on all of the research and examinations presented in the previous chapters, numerous guidelines for establishing a financially successful dinner theatre are conclusive. This research accepts theatres which are currently operating successfully as models and shows what types of procedures and conditions should be followed in order to operate a similarly successful theatre. If the assumption is made that all of the data is valid, a prospective producer may choose the location and operation methods of his proposed theatre to match standards revealed by this investigation.

LOCATION

A community of adequate size and economy to support a theatre should be chosen. As indicated earlier the community should have a population of at least 200,000 to assure success. The chosen community should be centrally located within surrounding smaller communities which depend on it for entertainment and other cultural resources. The community must have adequate transportation facilities (which is almost always the case where the suggested population or greater is concerned).

People of a proposed community must be culturally aware of theatre and the arts. They should be sophisticated with open attitudes toward education, recreation, religion and other topics. A general assumption which may be followed, but often is not the case, is that the thea-

tre-going public is composed of highly educated, upper income bracket persons of white or Anglo-Saxon backgrounds. Although such persons may be prototypical audience members, they should never be considered the sole dictate for each production choice. Once the community has been tentatively selected, the producer must do extensive research to determine his audience potential and to find out what type of people will compose his clientele.

The theatre itself will probably work best if it is a renovated building with a large amount of space. Old theatres have too many built-in sightline problems which do not convert easily to dinner theatres. Newly constructed buildings have cost problems which are often-times prohibitive.

STRUCTURE AND EQUIPMENT

The theatre itself should be large; the more backstage room and work-storage space, the better. The best arrangement is a thrust stage concept, but an arena stage concept is also acceptable. Proscenium staging should be avoided. Stage equipment, such as lighting controls, and sound equipment, depends upon the style of productions and upon how elaborate the producer and/or designers intend to become. The more money used to install elaborate equipment, the easier it may make productions; however, overly costly equipment will not necessarily be needed if imagination and ingenuity are shown coupled with quality performances.

A scene shop should be handy for construction of props, scenery and costumes for each production. Storage space is also needed to handle scenery, props and costumes from previous productions which may be used again in the future.

Expense must not be spared in the added conveniences for the lobby and exterior. These items such as parking lot facilities and lobby design will make a good impression on the customer paying his first visit to the theatre. These are the things which will put the customer in a more receptive frame of mind for the production and food which await him.

METHODS OF OPERATION

The staff for the theatre must be carefully chosen. Each person must be the right choice for the job. This task is best accomplished by advertising for the positions needed and hiring the most qualified candidates based on past experience, resumes, and personal interviews and recommendations. The most effective policy for hiring actors is on a production by production basis rather than hiring a stock company. This method of employment is the least expensive unless the theatre plans to have a company of people who will do all of the work for the theatre and fill in as actors when needed, a somewhat unprofessional choice. Actors should not be members of Actors' Equity Association unless the theatre can truly afford to be a complete Equity house, a practice very few opening theatres can afford.

Productions should be primarily comedic in style. A variety in style is advisable including at least one or two musical comedies, and perhaps one play of a serious nature, such as a mystery or melodrama. Length of season should be six productions, each one running approximately six weeks with five performances a week. This season allows for thirty productions per show and 180 per season. More performances can be added if necessary.

The food should be of a quality equal to any upper class restaurant in the city. Dinner may be served by waiters to the audience, but will work best if served buffet style with waiters and waitresses serving only drinks, sold at additional charges.

Reservations should be easy to obtain, but should be paid for in advance, eliminating last minute cancellation problems. Special situations such as banquet facilities or group bookings for theatre parties should be accommodated. Seating capacity should be at least 150 with tables arranged to seat groups of two, four or six. They should not be permanently affixed to the floor so larger table arrangements can be made if necessary.

Community resources must be employed extensively to add with publicity and other audience related areas. This necessitates the producer and other members of the staff becoming actively involved in the local community, both with local reciprocal purchasing and as members of various local organizations.

Publicity should be a maintenance item working on a fixed schedule for each production. There should be ample opportunity to add special gimmicks or campaigns as the need arises. These items are the daily chores of the publicity director once the initial publicity campaign is underway. Publicity for the opening of the theatre and the first season should be as elaborate and eye-catching as is financially possible for the theatre. A special invitational free performance should be given as a publicity campaign send-off for the VIP's of the community. An invitational performance will gain word of mouth publicity.

The box office must be well-staffed and well-managed by people who are efficient and honest. They must combine the talents of business-

men and public relations personnel to handle the customers satisfactorily. Tickets should be priced approximately at \$12.00. Season tickets and coupons could be offered for a slight reduction to help generate initial revenue.

FINANCES

Tables are given in Appendix A which graphically illustrate the initial concerns for the opening budget of the theatre. A typical operation as described should begin with an opening budget of approximately \$500,000. This amount will allow for capital investments in equipment and renovations as well as the first season operational expenses of fixed items such as rent and the opening production budget. Once the first show has opened, box office returns should provide funding for each successive production with a margin of profit aside to pay back the initial investment. Profits and deficits can be projected by examining expenses and comparing them with possible income. Ways of generating additional income and controlling expenses are discussed to show how to attain a profit margin.

"What makes dinner theater so successful is that . . . they are enormously lucrative."⁸⁹ Of course a theatre is lucrative only when it is wisely run following the given guidelines. It is the hope of this author that some of the decisions which must be made when setting up such a "lucrative" business can be assisted by the information presented herein. Once this task is complete, the rest of the success or failure depends upon the producer.

⁸⁹Feldman, p. 42.

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APPENDIX A

In the following appendix are several tables referred to throughout the text. Table 1 consists of the results of a marketing research survey of several larger mid-western cities, all of which contain at least one operating dinner theatre.

Table 2 is a listing of staff requirements for an 800 seat AEA stock theatre. This is a larger theatre than is normal for dinner theatre, as well as employing an Equity company; but it should give some ideas of positions needed in a theatre.

Tables 3 and 4 are budget estimations for a typical dinner theatre seating 150 to 200 people and producing 180 performances in a yearly season.

TABLE 1
MID-WEST CITIES MARKETING RESEARCH
from the 1970 Census Reports⁹⁰

City	1970 Population	1977 Est. Population	% of Change	Median yrs. Schooling Completed	% Completed 4 yrs. H. S. or more	% Black Population	% Unemp.
Colorado Springs	235,972	295,400	20.1	12.6	72.9	5.1	5.5
Denver	1,227,612	1,430,700	14.1	12.5	67.4	4	3.7
Des Moines	286,101	334,700	14.5	12.4	68.0	3.8	2.8
Oklahoma City	640,888	764,700	16.1	12.3	61.0	7.9	3.2
Omaha	540,142	580,500	6.9	12.3	62.7	6.7	3.0
Tulsa	476,892	599,100	20.3	12.2	58.2	7.5	4.6
Wichita	389,352	381,800	-1.9	12.4	63.2	7.1	7.1

⁹⁰U. S. Department of Commerce, 1970 Census of Population, Characteristics of the Population, United States Summary (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, June 1973), Table 184, pp. 1-552 to 1-554.

TABLE 1
MID-WEST CITIES MARKETING RESEARCH
from the 1970 Census Reports
Page 2

City	% Employed in Manufacturing or Industry	% Employed in White Collar Jobs	% Employed in Government Jobs	Median Income	% Earning \$15,000 Income or More
Colorado Springs	11.1	55.6	23.1	8,974	17.2
Denver	17.0	59.2	18.1	10,777	24.8
Des Moines	19.0	58.2	14.2	10,682	23.5
Oklahoma City	13.8	56.1	25.1	9,345	19.0
Omaha	17.1	52.6	13.3	10,204	21.2
Tulsa	20.6	53.2	10.9	9,286	18.1
Wichita	27.1	52.1	13.2	9,413	17.1

TABLE 2

AN 800 SEAT, NON-MUSICAL THEATRE TYPICAL MINIMUM STAFF REQUIREMENTS⁹¹

Stock theatre using AEA company
(multi-production season)

Full-time operating staff (non union)	Part-time or on fee, royalty or optional
Producer or Artistic Director	Board of Directors (if nonprofit)
General Manager	Attorney
Business Manager	Accountant
House Manager	Director*
Secretary	Author*
Box Office Treasurer	Group Sales Manager
Assistant Treasurer	Ushers
Publicity Director	Ticket-takers
Janitor(s)	Doorman
Production Stage Manager*	Poster boys, etc.
Scenic Designer	Security Guard
Lighting Designer	Hairdresser and Wig Specialist
Costume Designer	House Physician
Properties Master	Matrons
Technical Director	
Carpenter	
Seamstresses and Wardrobe Mistress	
Master Electricians	
5-15 Technicians or Apprentices	

*Working under union or other collective bargaining association contract.

⁹¹Langley, p. 72.

TABLE 3
BUDGET ESTIMATION FOR DINNER THEATRE

Building		
Monthly rent	@ \$2,500	\$ 30,000
Insurance		10,000
Maintenance, repair and upkeep		<u>7,500</u>
Total Building Expenses		47,500
Permits, Licenses, etc.		
Restaurant		
Liquor		
Building permits for renovations		
Parking		
Business licenses		
Local association dues		
Professional association dues		
Total Permits, Licenses, etc.		4,500
Legal, Consultants, etc.		
Marketing research		
Fund raising expenses		
Lawyer fees		
Inspectors		
Architect		
Business consultants		
Theatre consultants		
Wage & hour administration consultant		
OSHA consultant		
Restaurant consultant		
Total Legal, Consultants, etc.		11,000
Renovations		
Structural		
Electrical		
Theatrical		
Utilitarian		
Plumbing		
Sound Design		
Fixtures & furnishings		
Marquee		
Parking		
Safety regulations		
Ramps and facilities for the handicapped		
Total renovation expenses		168,000
Equipment		
Restaurant equipment		75,000
Theatre equipment		<u>33,000</u>
Total Equipment Expense		108,000

TABLE 3 continued

Personnel and Administration		
3 administrators	@ \$*,000	\$ 24,000
8 waiters, waitresses		33,072
2 bartenders		16,640
1 box office staff		5,512
1 stage manager		7,200
2 custodians	@ \$4,134	8,268
1 pianist		<u>3,120</u>
Total Personnel and Administration Expense		97,812
Production Cost per Show		35,150
Miscellaneous Expense		11,000
Total Budget to Begin Operation		<u>\$ 500,000</u>

TABLE 4
BUDGET ESTIMATION FOR MUSICAL PRODUCTION

Salaries to actors	\$ 4,750
Scenery	2,500
Props	750
Lighting	500
Costuming	2,000
Music	750
Scripts	500
Royalties	1,125
Publicity	2,500
Box Office	1,000
Programs	750
Tickets	500
Equipment	1,250
Food	14,400
Miscellaneous	1,500
Contingent Needs	<u>375</u>
Total Budget	<u>\$ 35,150</u>

APPENDIX B

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE WITH RESULTS

605 E. 11th, Apt. 3
Emporia, Kansas 66801
November 9, 1977

Dear Theatre Manager or Producer,

I am conducting the following survey of dinner theatres to complete a thesis for a Master of Arts degree. The title of the thesis will be "A Survey of Preliminary Considerations for the Establishment of a Financially Successful Professional Dinner Theatre." The Information gained from surveys like this one which have been mailed all over the country will be tabulated in hopes of finding a correlation between degree of financial success and methods of operation.

It would help my research immensely if you would take time from your busy schedule to complete the enclosed questionnaire and return it to me in the pre-addressed envelope. This information will be kept confidential and used only to tabulate results for the survey. I will be glad to send you a copy of the final results if you so desire.

It will also help speed the tabulation of results if you can possibly return this to me by December 31, 1977. If someone else in your employ could provide the answer to some of the questions, please direct this to the appropriate department. Thank you for your time and consideration. I will greatly appreciate any assistance you can offer.

Sincerely,

Robert E. Miller

Dinner Theatre Questionnaire

Name _____ Position _____

Name of Theatre (14 theatres out of 100 responded)
(Numbers represent number of responses by all theatres. Some producers responded for more than one theatre which explains why some questions have more than a total of 14 responses.)

Street _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____

How many years has your theatre been in operation? (Check one).

Less than 1 year 1. 1-3 yrs. 3. 4-7 yrs. 6. 8-15 yrs. 3.Over 15 yrs. 1.

On the following please check the response that best answers the question. If more than one answer applies, check all the correct responses.

I. Methods of Operation

1. Where within the community is your theatre located?

Extremely urban district 5. Urban-residential 4. Residential 1. Residential-rural 4. Extremely rural district _____.

2. Your theatre was

already existing and adapted to your use 3. an unused building (not a theatre) which was renovated to your use 7. constructed for your use 4.

3. Your theatre is considered

theatre in the round 5. thrust staging 7. a proscenium stage 2. other 1.

4. Most of the costumes for each production are

rented 1. purchased _____. constructed 9. borrowed 4. provided by the actors 2. other _____.

5. Ample storage and work space is provided backstage for costumes, props, scenery and so forth.

Yes 9 . No 5 .

6. The outside of the building uses special lighting during performances 3 . uses a lighted marquee 4 . does not use a marquee or other special lighting other than adequate lighting to see 9 .

7. Your theatre employs a regular staff of 1-4 1 . 5-15 2 . 16-30 2 . 31-49 2 . 50 or more employees 7 .

8. When hiring actors you always hire big-name celebrities 2 . frequently hire celebrities ____ . occasionally hire celebrities 2 . rarely hire celebrities 8 . never hire celebrities 3 .

9. A number of non-paid apprentices are used as actors or technical crew workers.

Yes 4 . No 10 .

10. This theatre hires directors and designers as needed 6 . has a resident director 4 . has a resident designer or designers 5 . books packages 1 .

11. Are most crew workers and other staff members excluding performers members of unions (such as ATPAM, IATSE, or United Scenic Artists)?

Yes ____ . No 14 .

12. The types of productions most frequently presented are comedies 5 . dramas 1 . musicals 2 . a combination of comedies and musicals 5 . comedies and dramas ____ . dramas and musicals 1 .

13. Performances are
 limited to 1 a week _____. two per week _____. 3-4 per week 3 .
 5-6 per week 7 . 7 nights a week 2 . more than seven 2 .

14. A typical length of run for a show would be
 1-2 weeks _____. 3-6 weeks 9 . 7-12 weeks 4 . more than 12
 weeks 1 .

15. Does your theatre have a particular theme (in style of
 entertainment such as only producing melodramas, or in interior
 decoration such as extensive use of antiques)?

Yes 3 . No 11 .

16. If yes, please describe. period scripts and a vaudeville
olio; only melodramas; decor of stone and wood

17. Does your theatre provide any pre-show entertainment
 before the actual performance begins?

Yes 5 . No 9 .

18. Does your theatre try to plan an entire season so as to
 be able to use season advertising and season tickets?

Yes 9 . No 6 .

19. Does your theatre operate on a seasonal basis rather than
 year round?

Yes 4 . No 11 .

20. The provided food is
 cooked in your own kitchens 12 . catered by an outside company 2 .

21. The meal is

buffet style with audience members serving themselves 11 . served to the audience members by waiters/waitresses 4 .

22. If you have any particular specialty in food or drinks could you please list?

Villain's Revenge (Collins drink); giveaway glasses

23. Would you please either include a sample menu with this survey when returning it, or else please list a sample menu in the space provided below?

Roast Beef; Veal Cutlet Parmesan; Rigatoni; Sirloin Steak; Prime

Rib; Weiner Schnitzel; Fried Catfish; Ham; Seafood Newberg; Shrimp

Salad

24. Do the waiters/waitresses participate in the actual performance or pre-show entertainment in any way?

Yes 3 . No 11 .

25. Is a discount rate available to large groups when reserved together?

Yes 14 . No .

26. Does your theatre have a patron list of special people who have helped in special ways either through monetary contributions or other assistance?

Yes 2 . No 12 .

27. The house manager

is part of the regular box office staff during the day 4 . also has duties such as publicity 1 . is on the staff in another capacity such as executive secretary, business manager, director, etc. 4 .

is hired only to house manage during performances 1 . we do not have a house manager 4 .

28. The ushers are
 also the waiters/waitresses 2. also the cast members 1. also the
 normal daily box office staff 1. only ushers and nothing else 7.
 we do not have ushers 3.

29. Do you allow advertising space in your programs?
 Yes 12. No 2.

30. Regarding publicity you
 work through an advertising agency for publicity 1. have a press
 agent or other outside publicity person 1. have a permanent publi-
 city director on the staff 4. hire a part time pulicity director
_____. have one of the staff or the managers to do publicity 8.

31. Which of the publicity items would you say you rely on
 the most or put the most money into?

Posters _____. Fliers 2. Radio ads 3. Newspaper ads 11.
 Television ads 2. Marquees, displays, etc. 1. Free announce-
 ments 3. Direct mail 1.

II. Financial Section

Please remember that this information will be kept confidential and
 will only be used to complete research for the dinner theatre thesis.
 On some of the questions in this section would you please fill in the
 blank with an approximate figure? Please remember that accuracy de-
 pends on your statements. Thank you again for your help and your time.
 Note: should you desire the results of the thesis study only averages
 or conclusions of the financial section will be given. No specific
 information will be dispersed to any agency or organization.

1. The box office is
 managed by a staff member hired only for that job 7. managed by
 the treasurer of the theatre who also controls all financial affairs
4. managed by the business manager 3.

2. What are your ticket prices? \$5 to \$9--2; \$10 to \$13--5;

\$14 to \$18--3

3. Do you sell season tickets?

Yes 7 . No 7 .

4. If so, how many admissions does it allow? _____

3 to 6 admissions--4; 7 to 12 admissions--3

5. What is the price of a season ticket? 10% discount on any

admission; \$15; \$25; \$25; \$32-\$39; \$48; \$87

6. If you have patrons what must a person do to become one?

\$100 donation

7. Your future plans for your establishment include

no future plans 3 . closing the present facilities ____ . expansion
of the present facilities 5 . establishing another theatre in this
city 2 . establishing another theatre in another city 4 .

8. Please list the permanent staff positions you hire or have
on your payroll.

Producer	Box Office Manager	Cooks
Treasurer	Secretary	Bartender
Director	Business Manager	Waiters/Waitresses
Casting Director	Bookkeepers	Busboys
Tech. Director	Supply Manager	Custodians
Manager	House Manager	
Stage Manager	Food and Beverage Manager	
Sales Director	Chef	

9. How much would you estimate it would cost a typical dinner theatre to begin operation in a community such as yours, including all opening expenses (such as renovations to the building, hiring the staff as well as the opening show budget)?

\$25,000--1; \$250,000--1; \$300,000--1; \$400,000 to \$800,000--5;

\$1.25 million--1

10 Could you please estimate a budget for a typical production (flexible budget items)? Leave blank any that do not apply.

Pension Contributions 5% of payroll

Health Insurance 5% of payroll plus 1000

Social Security and Unemployment 11% of payroll; \$10 person/week; \$30,000;

Welfare (stagehands) _____

Fees and Commissions 700; 300/yr

Salaries: Production (artistic) 1000; 200; 85,000; 5000

Production (technical) 1000; 200; 2500/week; 800

Performers 1000; 100/week

Musicians 1000; 200; 120/week

Publicity 3000; 500; 12,000; 400/month; 3000

Box Office (tickets, etc.) 2000; 100; 500

Printing (programs, duplicating scripts, etc.) 10,000; 100; 12,000; 2000/season
100/week;

Rehearsal Supplies, Rentals, etc. 100; 6,000

Royalties 800; 15,000; 250/season; 200/week; 2000

Electrics and Sound 6000; 75; 75/month; 100/month

Scenery and Props 4000; 200; 4500; 75/season; 500

Costumes, Makeup and Wigs 4000; 100; 2500; 300/season; 300

Laundry and Dry Cleaning 100/week; 25; 100/month; 100/week; 400

Piano and Orchestra 75; 150

Transportation (company) 1 vehicle; 1000

Trucking (scenery) 1000/show; 10

Restaurant Supplies 5000; 13,500; 300/month; 5000/yr
 Food Supplies 25,000/month; 134,000; 5500/month; 3000/week
 Liquor and Beverages 6000/month; 33,000; 900/month
 Miscellaneous 150/month

11. Could you please estimate a budget for the annual operation of a dinner theatre (inflexible budget items)? Leave blank any that do not apply.

Mortgage and Rent Payments 6000; 48,000; 12,000; 18,000
 Interest 2,500
 Licenses and Permits 250; 500; 1000; 300
 Insurance 1200; 13,000; 12,000
 Legal and Auditing 500; 5000; 2200; 3600
 Taxes 1000
 Automobile Expenses 7000; 7200
 Travel (administrative) 2000
 Maintenance and Repair 2000; 6500; 2000; 3000
 Office Supplies 500; 5000; 1000; 1500
 Postage 750; 3500; 240; 500
 Heat, Light, Power and Water 750; 27,000; 6000; 12,000
 Telephone and Telegraph 500; 10,000; 1500; 3600
 Rental of Equipment 500; 1800
 Plant Opening and Closing _____
 Auditions _____
 Pre-season advertising 3000; 14,000
 Board Meetings and Expenses _____
 Salaries: Administrative 5000; 85,000; 50,000
 Maintenance 750; 6000

Payroll Taxes and Benefits _____

Miscellaneous _____

12. What percentage of the total opening expense would each of the following items take?

Purchase or Rent of Building	20	%
Legal Fees	5	%
Renovation Costs (exterior)		%
Renovation Costs (interior)	40	%
New, Permanent Equipment	20	%
Permits, Licenses, etc.	5	%
Miscellaneous		%
Opening Show Budget	10	%
Annual Operating Budget		%

13. Could you please estimate an annual gross income for a dinner theatre similar to yours?

\$35,000; \$600,000; \$1,000,000

14. What percentage of the annual gross income would each of the following items make up?

	Averages	%
Federal and State Grants		%
Gifts from Private Industry		%
Patron Donations 10	2.5	%
Ticket Sales 55; 72; 95; 30	63	%
Season Ticket Sales 30; 5; 15	12.5	%
Liquor and Beverages 15; 50	16.25	%
Souvenir Sales (record albums, programs, etc.)		%
Coat Room Income		%
Program Advertising 5; 3; 5	3.25	%
Miscellaneous 10	2.5	%

15. What percentage of the seating capacity would you estimate that you sell during a typical night of a successful show?

Less than 33% _____. 33%-49% _____. 50%-74% 4 . 75%-100% 9 .
Usually 100% _____.

16. What percentage of your attendance would you estimate is due to attendance of patrons?

5; 50; 50 _____ %

17. What percentage of your attendance would you estimate is due to attendance of season ticket holders?

30; 20; 50; 20 _____ %

18. Are you affiliated with an organized chain of theatres?

Yes _____. No 14 .

19. Is your theatre a member of any professional organizations (such as American Theatre Association, etc.)?

Yes 4 . No 10 .

20. If you are a member of professional organizations, please list them.

1--American Dinner Theatre Association; 1--American Dinner Theatre Institute; 7--Actor's Equity Association

21. What is the average price of a drink if you serve alcoholic beverages?

\$1.25--1; \$1.50--6; \$1.75--3; \$2.00--1; Do not serve alcohol--1

22. In what year after your theatre opened did it first show a profit?

During the 1st year 5 . 2nd yr. 2 . 3rd 3 . 4th _____. 5th 1 .
6th _____. 7th _____. 8th _____. 9th _____. 10th or beyond 1 . It
hasn't shown a profit yet 1 .

23. What is your net profit percentage of the gross revenue?

10; 4

%

Thank you again for your support and cooperation. Check here if you would like me to send you the results of this survey.

11 . Yes, send me your results.

As I have already stated, the purpose of this survey is to establish correlations between methods of operation and degree of financial success by compiling the above information on dinner theatres throughout the United States. You have just provided a very valuable assistance to this goal. Thanks again. Please try to return this to me by December 31, 1977.

Robert E. Miller
Master of Arts Candidate
Emporia State University

APPENDIX C

LIST OF RESPONDING THEATRES

Iron Springs Chateau Dinner Theatre, Manitou Springs, Colorado.

Heritage Square Opera House Dinner Theatre, Golden, Colorado.

Golden Apple Dinner Theatre, Sarasota, Florida.

Left Bank Dinner Theatre, Peoria, Illinois.

Upstage Dinner Theatre, Evansville, Indiana.

Diner's Playhouse Dinner Theatre, Lexington, Kentucky.

Garland Dinner Theatre, Columbia, Maryland.

Chanhassen Courtyard Dinner Theatre, Chanhassen, Minnesota.

The Craig Theatre, Summit, New Jersey.

An Evening Dinner Theatre, Elmsford, New York.

Northstage Theatre, Glen Cove, New York.

You Are Cabaret Dinner Theatre, North Royalton, Ohio.

The Barn Dinner Theatre, Nashville, Tennessee.

Hayloft Dinner Theatre, Manassas, Virginia.

APPENDIX D

MASTER LIST OF DINNER THEATRES WITH GEOGRAPHICAL BREAKDOWN

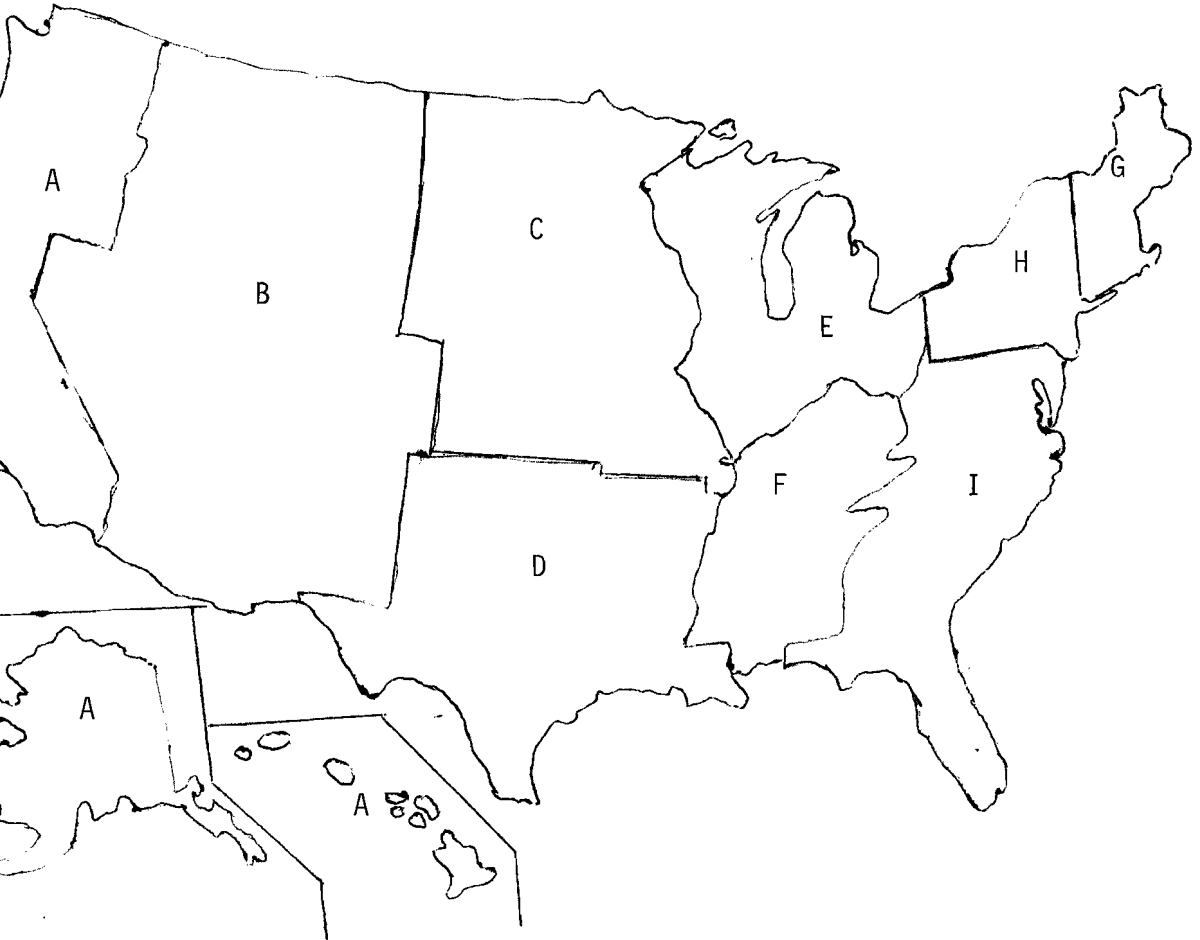
The following list of dinner theatres is not complete. It was obtained from the Actors' Equity Association (and should contain all Equity theatres) and the Leo Shull Publication, Dinner Theatres. All are professional, profit seeking organizations. Because of recent openings and some non-Equity theatres not listing with Leo Shull Publications, this list will be incomplete. It is virtually impossible to obtain a complete list of all dinner theatres in the United States, but attempts will be made to add to this list whenever possible.

Nine Geographical Regions and the States Included in Each

- A. Pacific Coast: Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington.
- B. Mountain: Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming.
- C. West North Central: Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota.
- D. West South Central: Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas.
- E. East North Central: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin.
- F. East South Central: Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee.
- G. New England: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont.
- H. Mid Atlantic: New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania.

I. South Atlantic: Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia.

Map of United State Regional Breakdown



Key:	Pacific Coast	A	East North Central	E
	Mountain	B	East South Central	F
	West North Central	C	New England	G
	West South Central	D	Mid Atlantic	H
	South Atlantic	I		

Master List of Dinner TheatresPacific Coast

Alaska: No listings

California:

Anaheim: Sebastian's Dinner Playhouse

Hollywood: Attache Dinner Theatre

Los Angeles: Kentucky Fried Dinner Theatre

Santa Ana: Harlequin

San Clemente: Sebastian's West Dinner Playhouse

San Diego: Broadway Dinner Theatre

Hawaii: No listings

Oregon: No listings

Washington:

Seattle: Cirque Dinner Theatre

Mountain

Arizona:

Scottsdale: Windmill Dinner Theatre

Tucson: Comedy Dinner Theatre

Colorado:

Boulder: Acropolis Dinner Playhouse

Denver: Colorado Music Hall Dinner Theatre

Englewood: Country Dinner Playhouse

Golden: Heritage Square Opera House Dinner Theatre

Greeley: Chuckwagon Dinner Playhouse

Manitou Springs: Iron Springs Chateau Dinner Theatre

Idaho: No listings

Montana: No listings

Nevada: No listings

New Mexico:

Albuquerque: Ole Henry's Dinner Theatre

Cedar Crest: Barn Dinner Theatre

Utah:

Salt Lake City: Gaslight Dinner Theatre

Tiffany's Attic Dinner Playhouse

Wyoming: No listings

West North Central

Iowa: No listings

Kansas:

Topeka: The Showcase Dinner Theatre

Wichita: Crown Uptown Dinner Theatre

Minnesota:

Chanhassen: Chanhassen Courtyard Dinner Theatre

Chanhassen Dinner Theatre--Upstairs

Chanhassen Downstairs

Minneapolis: Friar's Minnesota Music Hall Dinner Theatre

Missouri:

Ballwin: Barn Dinner Theatre

Kansas City: Limelight Dinner Theatre

Off-Broadway Dinner Theatre

Tiffany's Attic Dinner Theatre

Waldo Astoria Dinner Playhouse

St. Louis: Barn Dinner Theatre

Plantation Playhouse

Nebraska:

Omaha: Firehouse Dinner Theatre
 Talk of the Town Dinner Theatre
 Westroads Dinner Theatre

North Dakota: No listings

South Dakota: No listings

West South Central

Arkansas:

Little Rock: Old West Dinner Theatre

Louisiana:

Jefferson: Beverly Dinner Playhouse

Shreveport: Barn Door Dinner Theatre

Oklahoma:

Oklahoma City: Lincoln Plaza Playhouse

Tulsa: Gaslight Dinner Theatre

Texas:

Austin: Country Dinner Playhouse

Dallas: Country Dinner Playhouse

Crystal Dinner Theatre

Granny's Dinner Playhouse

Houston: Dean Goss's Dinner Theatre

Windmill Dinner Theatre

Lubbock: Hayloft Dinner Theatre

Odessa: The Mansion

East North Central

Illinois:

Chicago: In-The-Round Dinner Playhouse

Peoria: Left Bank Dinner Playhouse

St. Charles: Pheasant Run Dinner Playhouse

Summit: Candlelight Dinner Playhouse

Indiana:

Clarksville: Derby Dinner

Evansville: Upstage Dinner Theatre

Greenwood: Gold Curtain Dinner Theatre

Indianapolis: Beef 'n' Boards of America

Black Curtain Dinner Theatre

Michigan: No listings

Ohio:

Cleveland: Playhouse Square Cabaret

Columbus: Country Dinner Theatre

Canal Fulton: Canal Fulton Dinner Theatre

Harrison: Beef 'n' Boards Dinner Theatre of Ohio, Inc.

London: Columbus--Springfield Dinner Theatre

Miamisburg: Towpath Dinner Theatre

North Royalton: You Are Cabaret Dinner Theatre

Ravenna: Carousel Dinner Theatre

Reynoldsburg: Country Dinner Playhouse

Toledo: Westgate Dinner Theatre

Wisconsin: No listings

East South Central

Alabama:

Birmingham: Celebrity Dinner Theatre

Montgomery: Lampliter Dinner Theatre

Kentucky:

Lexington: Diner's Playhouse Dinner Theatre

Simpsonville: Beef 'n' Boards Dinner Theatre of America, Inc.

Winchester: New Barn Dinner Theatre

Mississippi: No listings

Tennessee:

Kingsport: Olde West Dinner Theatre

Nashville: Barn Dinner Theatre

New England

Connecticut:

East Windsor: Chateau De Ville Dinner Theatre

Higganum: Four Seasons Dinner Theatre

New Haven: Sheraton Park Plaza Dinner Theatre

Oxford: Colonial Club Dinner Theatre

Warehouse Point: Coachlight Dinner Theatre

Maine: No listings

Massachusetts:

Framingham: Chateau De Ville Dinner Theatre

Randolph: Chateau De Ville Dinner Theatre

Saugus: Chateau De Ville Dinner Theatre

Shirley: Bull Run Dinner Theatre

New Hampshire: No listings

Rhode Island:

Warwick: Chateau De Ville Dinner Theatre

Vermont: No listings

Mid Atlantic

New Jersey:

Cranford: Celebration Playhouse

East Orange: Actor's Cafe Theatre

Mt. Lakes: Neil's New Yorker

Morgan: Club Bene

Orange: Langdon Street Players

Summit: The Craig Theatre

West Orange: Mayfair Farms Dinner Theatre

New York:

Baldwin: Carl Hoppl's Dinner Theatre

East Meadow, Long Island: Theatre Tonight

Elmsford: An Evening Dinner Theatre

Franklin Square, Long Island: Vincent Sardi's Dinner Theatre

Garden City, Long Island: Theatre Tonight

Gilbertsville: Major's Inn Elizabethan Dinner Theatre

Glen Cove, Long Island: Northstage Theatre Restaurant

Hempstead, Long Island: Promenade Dinner Theatre

Tuckahoe: Parkway Casino Dinner Theatre

Williamsville: Mr. Anthony's Dinner Theatre

Woodbury: Fox Hollow Inn

Pennsylvania:

Boiling Springs: Allenberry Dinner Theatre

Bushkill: Limelight Dinner Theatre

Huntingdon Valley: Huntingdon Valley Dinner Theatre

Philadelphia: Cafe Society Dinner Theatre

Grendel's Lair Dinner Theatre

Pittsburgh: La Bastille Dinner Theatre

Shamokin Dam: Brookside Playhouse

South Atlantic

Delaware: No listings

Florida:

Ft. Lauderdale: Sea Ranch Dinner Theatre
 Jacksonville: Alhambra Dinner Theatre
 Lauderhill: Oakland West Dinner Theatre
 Miami Beach: Persian Room Dinner Theatre
 North Naples: Naples Dinner Theatre
 Orlando: Once Upon a Stage Dinner Theatre
 Pinellas Park: Tampa Showboat
 Sarasota: Golden Apple Dinner Theatre
 St. Petersburg: Country Dinner Playhouse
 Tampa: Bartke's Dinner Theatre

Georgia:

Atlanta: Midnight Sun Dinner Theatre
 Marietta: Barn Dinner Theatre

Maryland:

Baltimore: Canterbury Dinner Playhouse
 New Bolton Hill Dinner Theatre
 Burtonsville: Burn Brae Dinner Theatre
 Cockeysville: Limestone Valley Dinner Theatre
 Oregon Ridge Dinner Theatre
 Columbia: Garland Dinner Theatre
 Rockville: Harlequin Dinner Theatre
 Silver Springs: Villa Rosa Dinner Theatre

North Carolina:

Morrisville: The Village Dinner Theatre
 Pineville: Pineville Dinner Theatre
 The Village Dinner Theatre

South Carolina: No listings

Virginia:

Arlington: Arlingtonian Dinner Theatre

Charlottesville: Shenandoah

Hanover: Barcksdale Dinner Theatre

Leesburg: Mosby Dinner Theatre

Manassas: Hayloft Dinner Theatre

Mt. Vernon: Cedar Knoll Dinner Theatre

Norfolk: Cavalier Dinner Theatre

Tidewater Dinner Theatre

Richmond: Barn Dinner Theatre

Roanoke: Barn Dinner Theatre

Woodbridge: Lazy Susan Inn Dinner Theatre

West Virginia:

Hurricane: Mountaineer Dinner Theatre

Chart of Dinner Theatre Populations

Region	No. of States	No. of Theatres	Rank Most Theatres to Least
A	5	7	8
B	8	12	6
C	7	15	4
D	4	13	5
E	5	19	3
F	4	7	8
G	6	10	7
H	3	25	2
I	8	35	1

The above chart shows the population of dinner theatres in each of the nine geographical regions. It also lists these regions in a rank order with 1 being the region with the most theatres and 8 being the region with the least theatres. This rank order can be compared to the number of states in the regions. The two regions having the greatest number of states hold the ranks of 1 and 6 showing that number of states in a region does not necessarily account for number of dinner theatres. As is also evident, the largest population of dinner theatres occurs in the eastern sector of the United States.