

AA Theater Center's Days May Be Numbered

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The Asian American Theater Company, which celebrated the opening of its new space just over three years ago, may have to vacate that space if its financial situation doesn't improve.

To illustrate the severity of the problem, Sharon Omi of AATC sent out an appeal last month to past supporters of the company, stating, "Funding cutbacks have severely hurt us, and without strong ticket sales . . . we are in danger of closing our doors permanently."

Previously located in a space on California Street now occupied by a restaurant, AATC presented plays at different theaters around San Francisco for five years before moving into its current location on Arguello and Clement in 1989.

According to Eric Hayashi, AATC's artistic director, the move was made without a capital fund in place. "We did it because we had to. We didn't have another place, and we were spending so much money on the outside renting."

That year, the season opened with R.A. Shiomi's "Rosie's Cafe" and closed with Milton Murayama's "All I Asking for Is My Body." Two days after the last performance, the Loma Prieta earthquake hit.

"It flooded this place, damaged the ceiling," recalled Hayashi. "We had to rebuild this theater space twice within a year, and we hadn't finished paying the first time around. So we've been robbing Peter to pay Paul from the general fund ever since."

He noted that other mid-size theaters in the Bay Area have also been having trouble staying afloat financially. In recent years, two "bit the dust" and one lost its space.

A similar fate awaits AATC "if we don't sustain ourselves here and start building up, generating donations through the membership drive," said Hayashi. "That's what the (fundraising) letter's all about."

Although the company has no control over the rent and other expenses, it has been able to use its performing spaces to produce more revenue and publicity.

In addition to the main stage, AATC has two smaller stages, and usually all three are in use at the same time. At one point, Shiomi's "Uncle Tadao" was

being performed on one stage, Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" on another and Sam Shepard's "Fool for Love" on the third.

The strategy of renting space to non-Asian theater groups is paying off in other ways as well. "It helps in terms of visibility and access and people's views," Hayashi said.

AATC benefits from the potential "crossover" audience — people who would not ordinarily see an Asian American play. Those who come to the space to see comedian David Cohen or the Chicano comedy troupe Culture Clash might be more inclined to "try an Asian thing" on their next visit.

"On the off days, non-performance days, we have classes," Hayashi added. "So somebody's using the building seven days a week. There's a church here on Sunday mornings in one of the spaces. So we feel we're pretty much hitting our target goals of building use."

At the same time, he acknowledged that funding has been hampered by "some programming errors, in hindsight — shows that didn't make money."

AATC and other arts groups are facing "general cutbacks and flattened funding with government sources in general," he said. ". . . Most non-profits are classically undercapitalized to begin with. We're not like a social service agency that can land a steady and long-term contract. Arts organizations are just not in that shape."

Hayashi speculated that the theater's longevity — it has been around for 19 years — has led to a perception that it is a well established institution. "(People

in the community) think we're a big organization with lots of layers of bureaucracy and a lot of money and resources.

"Most organizations of our size that are still existent, run by people of color . . . just don't have the resources that the large arts institutions have."

AATC not only plays an important cultural role by developing new Asian American plays, but also helps keep Asian American actors employed, according to Hayashi.

"Because we're a union company, we're the single largest employer of Asian American actors . . . in the Bay Area. When they make theater here, they get paid. They don't get paid a full wage, but our artists are able to think about doing their art seriously, not on a waiver, not at a loss."

Hayashi reported that the response to the letter — aimed mainly at the Nikkei community because it coincided with the opening of "Uncle Tadao" — has been "very good."

"If we can resolve some of the financial problems that we're having now, we can turn ourselves around and even think about trying to be in this building in a more permanent way," he said.

Even if the campaign is unsuccessful, it will not mean the end of AATC, Hayashi said. "I really believe that the AATC is going to survive no matter what. We may not survive in this building . . . We may become just a production company."

But Hayashi, one of the company's founding members, felt "it would be a shame" to celebrate AATC's 20th anniversary in a rented theater.