

of displaced theaters

Street theater is a particular form of dramatic confrontation. It differs from theater done out-of-doors. The San Francisco Mime Troupe built its audiences by performing in the parks and Shakespeare-under-the-stars has a popular following from Oregon to San Diego.

But a serious problem in San Francisco, where there is a renaissance of little-theater activity, has put theaters out on the street. This is not a comic situation. It has reached such proportions that it seriously affects the health and welfare of the artistic community.

Little theaters have always had to make do, cut budgets, trim production costs, choose plays with small casts, pinch pennies and depend on volunteers. Working for free has been at the heart of community theater.

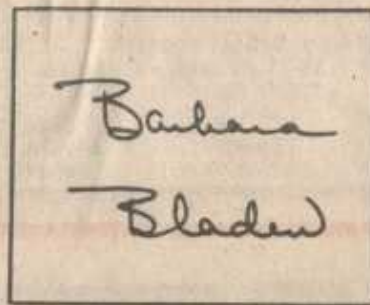
The plight of two of San Francisco's most respected theaters — Asian American Theater Company and Eureka Theater — has come to the attention of city officials, one of whom has set in action a plan that would effectively alter the entire theatrical scene.

Fifty little theaters operate in San Francisco, one of the largest number in any city in the United States. Theater attendance in San Francisco is one of the highest in the nation.

The Eureka Theater, a frequent prize-winning group considered one of the city's most reputable performing companies, found itself out on the street when the church in which it was housed at 16th and Market streets burned down in 1981. It was definitely not a street theater troupe.

Eureka Theater artistic director Anthony Taccone has announced a \$300,000, two-year fund-raising campaign to renovate the 10,600-square-foot garage space the company now occupies at 16th and Harrison streets. It will take \$200,000 for fire and seismic code upgrading before the company can perform there. The James Irvine Foundation has awarded the theater a \$30,000 challenge grant to inaugurate the campaign.

Equally critical is the situation of the Asian American Theater Company, which was performing successfully from a store-front space in the Richmond District. But just as audiences were discovering what the critics had been raving about, so did the Fire Department. Because of fire safety problems, the company was forced to move.



It is temporarily housed in the Fort Mason complex, where Magic Theater has found a niche.

Relief may be in sight with the announcement from City Hall that Supervisor Louise Renne is introducing to the Board of Supervisors measures designed to help small theaters in San Francisco. A hearing is scheduled for Jan. 25 before the supervisors' Finance Committee, which Renne chairs.

The first measure is legislation to allow property owners to check off a voluntary contribution when they file their property taxes. The money will be used to assist non-profit theaters in making needed renovations to meet fire, safety and other building codes, or to otherwise acquire or upgrade their facilities.

The second proposal would establish a revolving loan fund, supported by city revenues, to be used by theaters to make building code renovations and to assist in obtaining theater space. The fund would provide low or no-interest loans to small, non-profit theater groups.

"The public must be protected and know that they can enjoy performances in safe and comfortable settings. But it is beyond the financial ability of many of these small companies to upgrade their facilities without help," Ms. Renne said.

"Both the optional tax check-off, which will generate revenue, and the loan fund will make it immediately

possible for theaters to make needed renovations," she told a gathering of press and theater personnel at a conference with the Theater Communications Center and Bay Area Theater Alliance.

She noted that the effort to save San Francisco's small theaters was communitywide, involving actors, theater workers and critics groups as well as theater groups seeking support from the private and corporate as well as public sectors.

Renne's proposal has the full support from the rest of the board and from Mayor Dianne Feinstein and Chief Administrative Officer Roger Boas. The tax check-off program would be administered through the chief administrative officer's publicity and advertising fund. The emergency loan fund would begin with \$500,000.

According to Pamela Mason-Brune of the Bay Area Theater Alliance, a recent survey indicated that \$1 mil-

lion in renovations already are in the planning stages by San Francisco's non-profit theaters for this year.

Other troupes that have suffered similar setbacks are the One Act II theater and the S.E.W. Lorraine Hansberry Theater. Code violations have historically plagued the city's theaters. Years ago American Conservatory Theater was threatened with closing, but a dramatic zero-hour recovery allowed its season to open.

Interestingly, just as little theaters were establishing themselves and defining their audiences in various neighborhoods, there seems to be a movement to centralize in the South of Market area, once considered out of the question for night traffic.

If the idea catches hold and little theaters can secure affordable space in that presently inactive section, can restaurants, ice cream parlors, doughnut shops and small bistros be far behind?