

NEWS



LETTER

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WALTER H. WALTERS, Editor

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THE 1967-1968 NEWSLETTER

Beginning with this issue, the new editor for the USITT NEWSLETTER is Walter H. Walters, Associate Dean, College of Arts and Architecture, Pennsylvania State University. The associate editor is James Nuckolls of the firm of Gersztzoff, Nuckolls and Warfel, Inc., who will edit the ADMINISTRATION SUPPLEMENT which will be published with the NEWSLETTER.

Publication dates for the year are January, April, and June, 1968. All USITT news material and information for inclusion in the NEWSLETTER (and SUPPLEMENT) should be sent to Editor Walters (121 Arts Building, University Park, Penna., 16802) or Editor Nuckolls (207 East 37th Street, New York, N. Y. 10016). Material delivered to USITT's New York headquarters will be forwarded to the editors by the secretary. The NEWSLETTER will go to press on the first day of the month in which it is to be published. Deadlines for sending material should be calculated accordingly.

The NEWSLETTER should be a useful document for the Institute. Its aim is to provide service and information. It will be as useful and effective as the support and contributions it receives from the membership. With the new format, the NEWSLETTER will convey news and information of a timely nature. Accurate and meaningful contributions are requested. Meeting dates for committees of the Institute (where they can be anticipated in advance), notices of a personal and technical nature, and in general, items of interest based on reportage rather than research are appropriate to the purpose of the NEWSLETTER. In time, it is hoped additional supplements from other committees can be expanded into special sections. The current issue consists primarily of information relative to the By-Laws, to the Board and Executive Committee Membership, and items of informational interest related to administration.

Send all material which you wish considered for inclusion in the next NEWSLETTER before January 1, 1968!

The editors and Institute express their appreciation for the fine work and contribution by Jay B. Keene as NEWSLETTER editor until Fall, 1967.

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MEETINGS AND NOTICES (Additions to previously distributed schedule)

Architecture Committee -- Meets regularly on last Tuesday of each month (Nov. 28, Dec. 26, Jan. 30, Feb. 27, etc.)

Los Angeles, Calif. -- Convention, Speech Association of America. On December 28 from 8-10 P.M., in the Mission Room of the Statler Hilton Hotel, the USITT will hold a meeting stressing Arts Administration.

Chicago, Ill. -- The mid-year meeting of the Board of Directors of USITT will be in Chicago, Jan. 20, 1968.

Executive Committee -- Thursday, January 25, 6:45 PM - Bolt, Beranek & Newman auditorium.

OBSERVATIONS ON N.Y. CITY PLANNING - T. B. Birkenhead

Someone with imagination on the City Planning Commission of New York (Richard Weinstein?) has moved the Commission into a bold plan to bring about the construction of new theaters in this city. Walter Kerr on Sunday, October 22nd, asked the question "New Theaters for What?". Let it be noted immediately that Mr. Kerr's article is a positive and hopeful one. After giving a standard economic argument against increasing the supply of theaters in a town that is at best stagnant regarding the demand for theater, Mr. Kerr goes on to give his own argument for the need for new types of theaters which the Planning Commission is now in a position to force into being. In addition, the article points out that the view of the Planning Commission is that theaters are not economically justifiable now, and their approach of encouraged or forced production accepts this as fact.

Basically, the Commission will bring about the construction of new theaters within the framework of projected office buildings by offering the builder more floors than normally allowed under the building code - if he includes a theater in the building. The type of theater that is constructed is not at the discretion of the builder, but is a product of the thinking of the Commission. This means we can expect not only theaters that do not pay their way, (an exciting thought for many) but also theaters that break the still current mold. Mr. Kerr finds interesting not only the planned thrust stage theater, which appears to be the next one on the Commission's list, but also his own suggestion of "tryout" theaters. These tryout houses would allow the mounting of marginal productions which, if successful, would then be able to move to other houses.

With all of the above there is no argument. There is a need for new theaters from the point of view of architecture, and a noteworthy goal is the use of some houses for productions that may be able to succeed if only they have time to find an audience. The approach is also a "least cost" one. The theaters will be part of a larger structure, and therefore the floor space cost is kept to a minimum. Of equal importance, the subsidy is not paid for out of tax funds, but instead is provided by the builder and then offset by additional rental space which will be paid for at current floor space rates by the tenants. Who then is paying the subsidy? The public pays, but in a peculiar way. The cost is the waiver of the building code. It all sounds positive, but we do have some questions and doubts.

There is general agreement that attendance for New York theater has been relatively stagnant. As prices increased during the 1950's for theater in this city attendance did not decline. As prices remained constant from 1960 through 1967, attendance did not increase although people in the area experienced increases in income. We are not at this point questioning whether these new theaters should have to cover costs in order to exist. Even if we accept the "subsidy" approach, the stagnant nature of attendance poses another problem. Let us assume that all of these new theaters actually add to the number of seats available for theater. This will mean that, if successful, we will have more theaters, more seats, and more interesting theaters than we now possess. Let us also assume that the very presence of these theaters will encourage (1) the production of more plays, including musicals, (2) the writing of different types of plays because of the architecture of the new theaters, and (3) the mounting of plays written by new playwrights. Who will fill the seats? Unfortunately those who now attend the theater will probably be the only ones in attendance at the new theaters. This, of course, means empty seats for the existing commercial theaters. With only a little better than fifty per cent of capacity being utilized at the present, there is certainly need to question whether this will not lead to a decline in the number of commercial theaters in operation. If owning and operating a commercial theater is a marginal business now, an increase in competition from other theaters may force the closing of some older theaters until we are left with the same number of seats available as now - (admittedly they will be housed in more exciting structures than presently exist). The tendency to shut down is increased by more than purely economic forces. There is certainly a current pressure to convert a theater into capital gains by selling the location to a builder who will add to the City's collection of banks and parking lots. Now, however, a theater owner who also has a real involvement with "theater" can sell out to a builder who will not only build an office building but a theater as well. Mr. Kerr asks who will manage these new theaters. The most rational approach for present theater owners may be to sell out to builders who have agreed to include theaters in their structures on the stipulation that they be given management rights concerning operation of the new theaters.

If the Commission's plans are to lead to more than a substitution of new for old theaters then something must be done about attendance. A variety of approaches have been suggested in the past, running from subsidy for consumers to flexible pricing for theater tickets. We do not intend to go over this ground again. But there is no doubt that merely increasing the supply of theaters will not correct the central problem of live theater playing to an audience that represents a declining proportion of the population.

USITT NEWS REPORT FORM

Enclosed are the following materials:

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The enclosed materials are directed to the following Committee: () Administration () Architecture, () Engineering, () Presentation.

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by _____

ADMINISTRATORS LOOK AT THE SEASON TICKETHOLDER as a Part of The Theater Audience - Shirley A. Sluizer

(Ed. Note: The following article is a report of the panel held on Wednesday, August 23, 1967, at the AETA Convention in New York City.)

CHAIRMAN: Harold R. Oaks, Kearney State College, Kearney, Nebraska
SECRETARY: Shirley A. Sluizer, Wilmette Children's Theater, Wilmette, Illinois

PARTICIPANTS:

Art Cole, Manager, Midland Community Theater, Inc., Midland, Texas (Community Theater)
Herman Krawitz, Assistant Manager, Metropolitan Opera Association, New York (Professional Theater)
Jack H. Yocum, Director, University Theater, American University, Washington, D.C. (Academic Theater)

The three panelists, representing the community, academic, and professional theater, noted during the meeting that though there are individual differences in their respective philosophies regarding the season ticket holder as a part of the theater audience, they consider certain factors to be basic to all theater situations. All three agreed (1) that "audiences are made, not born," (2) that it is necessary, not only for the production to be of a high calibre, but also to be a "hit", and (3) that ideally a "product with greater demand than capacity" is advantageous, in that potential subscribers may consider a season membership necessary in order to obtain a seat for this particular offering. The panelists also pointed out the necessity of servicing accounts quickly and the importance of a real concern for the comfort of the audience. The suggestion was made that season ticket buyers hold "memberships" rather than subscriptions - audience involvement being the key.

Differences of opinion centered on when to have the "membership" drive. Whereas Mr. Cole favored mid-season, in order to take advantage of the winter lull and Christmas gift giving, Mr. Yocum felt obliged to gear his sale to the start of the academic year. Other differences voiced by the participants further reflected the particular needs of the individual theater.

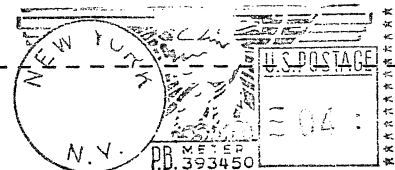
Individual tickets and coupon books were not favored by the academic and community theater representatives. Both felt a season ticket, to be punched when the holder presented it for admission, was the most desirable. The following was also suggested: (1) It is preferable to offer more admissions than can possibly be used, thus permitting a choice; and (2) that an odd number of punch possibilities on the season ticket is desirable.

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