

The San Jose Rep at age 30

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When James P. Reber raised the curtain on San Jose Repertory Theatre 30 years ago, its mission was to help make San Jose not just a big city but also a great one, a city with a world-class theater.

"I believed San Jose deserved a great theater so I founded one," says the plain-spoken Reber.

The Rep started out in 1980 with a shoestring budget of \$146,000, just 1,100 subscribers and a creaky old venue, the Montgomery Theater. Naysayers warned it could never rival powerhouses such as ACT and Berkeley Rep.

But the Rep held to a vision of bringing professional, provocative theater to San Jose, then widely dismissed as a cultural backwater in the shadow of San Francisco. The inaugural season was ambitious, celebrating such classics as Noel Coward's elegant comedy "Private Lives," Strindberg's incendiary "Miss Julie" and Shaw's rarely staged "Man of Destiny." And like all startups, the troupe had to scratch and claw to survive.

"Crisis is endemic to the arts," says Reber, now an arts consultant, "but you do what you've got to do. You dig in."

Now, on the eve of its 30th anniversary season, the company has come full circle. Long the city's premiere theater, once again the Rep must scrimp and save to make ends meet. Once again, the theater is reaching out to new audiences to survive.

While the Rep has been artistically rejuvenated by new leadership -- and recently scored hits with such shows as "FDR" starring Ed Asner and San Jose author Khaled Hosseini's blockbuster "The Kite Runner" -- it has been digging out of a financial hole since the city bailed it out in 2006. The economy has made matters worse and Rep leaders have had to make big cuts, including laying off six employees earlier this year.

"We are a resilient bunch. With all the ups and downs, the valley has gone through, we always find a way to navigate our way through," says Rep managing director Nick Nichols. "This anniversary has given me a great sense of responsibility. This is wonderful cultural gem and we have to be good caretakers."

Raising the bar

In the early days, the company raised the bar on local culture as then-sleepy San Jose was just emerging as a high-tech hub. While many groups start out as amateur efforts, Reber, who cut his teeth at the California Shakespeare Theater before starting the Rep, hired professional actors from day one. Over the years, the Rep substantially increased its budget and its reputation.

During longtime head Timothy Near's tenure, the troupe began to shine a light on high-profile premieres, playing host to such visionaries as director Anne Bogart (of the famed SITI company) and playwrights Charles Mee ("bobrauschenbergamerica") and Lynn Nottage (who won the Pulitzer for "Ruined.") The company established itself as beacon of live art in a city seduced by the digital, especially once the troupe moved into its \$24 million showcase theater, which fans fondly refer to as "the big blue box," in 1997.



New artistic director Rick Lombardo directs actors during rehearsal for the musical "Black Pearl Sings" at San Jose Rep in San Jose Saturday Aug. 28, 2010. San Jose's premier theater company is celebrating its 30th anniversary season. (Photo by Patrick Tehan/Mercury News)

"The Rep is a cornerstone of the arts community," says Lisa Mallette, head of San Jose's City Lights troupe. "The strength of the Rep affects all arts organizations, grounding San Jose as a place to come for arts and creativity."

Eventually the theater got on the national radar by drawing big-name stars including Oscar-winner Holly Hunter, best known for "The Piano," in the edgy Medea tale "By the Bog of Cats" in 2001 and Lynn Redgrave in her autobiographical play "The Mandrake Root" in 2002. These big-ticket productions exemplified the Rep's lofty ambition to become a major regional player, not just a local treasure. The troupe has yet to add a Tony Award to its shelf, as ACT and Berkeley Rep have done, and has failed to nab the Broadway success ("American Idiot," "Memphis") of other Bay Area theaters, but it has managed to garner respect for its artistic efforts.

Along the way, there have been crises as well, including the dot-com bust and a financial meltdown in 2006 that was weathered only with help from the city and from a few major donors. That's why this anniversary is a huge milestone in the life of the Rep.

"It's a great marker that really resonates because they have been around for a long time and they have served the community well," says Kerry Adams Hapner, San Jose's director of cultural affairs, who meets with Rep staff once a month to make sure that the budget is on target. "They are an anchor to the downtown and the valley as a whole."

Cultural touchstone

Indeed, many now see the fate of the Rep as a measure of the health of the valley's cultural scene at large. "This anniversary is a big deal because it means that they can survive this economy," says Bruce Davis, head of the Arts Council of Silicon Valley. "Last year was the worst year we have ever seen around here "... but these guys are still at it."

Subscriptions are down to 7,800 from 8,100 last year, and overall ticket sales have slumped 7 percent, but contributions are holding steady. Expenses are being pared to \$4.7 million, down from \$5 million this past season.

"We saw the writing on the wall in terms of the economy and made the cuts we need to make to survive," says artistic director Rick Lombardo, during a break in rehearsals for the season opener "Black Pearl Sings!," which has its opening night tonight. "We have downsized the organization but not our artistic ambitions."

Recent cutbacks, from shortening show runs to trimming staff, should save the Rep about \$300,000 but the company still faces financial hurdles. The deficit stands at \$369,101 and the theater relies heavily on its \$2 million line of credit with the city, which is scheduled to decrease by \$400,000 a year starting in 2012. They are also anticipating a shortfall for the 2009-10 season, pending completion of an audit.

"It's not enough to just squeak by," says Lombardo, who took over from Near in late 2008. "We need to post a surplus for a few years to prove that we can do it."

Engaging community

Many observers believe Lombardo, who came to San Jose from Boston's well-regarded New Repertory Theatre, is making headway in turning the company around. He and Nichols regularly hold "salons" to showcase their plans for the Rep. They have also started "pay-what-you-can nights."

These programs are aimed to re-energize a community some fear has become complacent about having the Rep in its backyard.

"I get the general sense that San Jose itself doesn't realize how truly important the Rep is and how lucky they are to have a fine theater in their midst," says veteran Bay Area actor James Carpenter.

The Rep, too shares some of the blame. Observers say its programming had become too safe and predictable in recent years and that it had lost touch with the community.

Lombardo is well on his way to changing all that.

"He is exactly the kind of artistic director the Rep needs now," Reber says. "We were in a doldrums, we were phoning it in, but he's really shaken things up."

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THE REP'S 30TH SEASON

The San Jose Repertory Theatre's 30th anniversary season will include:

"Black Pearl Sings!," by Frank Higgins, tonight-Sept. 26

"Secret Order," by Robert Clyman, Oct. 14-Nov. 7

"4PLAY," starring the Flying Karamazov Brothers, Nov. 10-14

"Backwards in High Heels," Nov. 24-Dec. 19

"The Dresser," by Ronald Harwood, Jan. 27-Feb. 20, 2011

"Legacy of Light," by Karen Zacarias, March 24-April 17, 2011

"Love in American Times," by Philip Kan Gotanda, May 12-June 5, 2011

Tickets: \$35-\$79, 408-367-7255, www.sjrep.com