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The Double Edged Sword

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Cuts to Theater in Tulsa
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The recent announcement of proposed cuts in arts funding, impacting Henthorne's Heller and Clark Theatres and the Tulsa PAC Trust, has shocked the Tulsa [theater](#) community. Whilst the Tulsa PAC Trust appears to be engaged in some high level discussions to challenge pending job cuts, the people at Henthorne have been busy garnering support via social media. Reactions within the community have been strong, prompting an anti-cut, flash mobbing of the public by Tulsa Project Theater. The sense of anger and hurt is palpable with emotions understandably running high. But behind the emotions some serious questions around investment in the arts need to be addressed dispassionately. When it comes to public spending, Mayor Bartlett is accountable for the manner in which he chooses to invest, or not invest, public money. It's a weighty responsibility.

Personal sympathies aside, the complexities surrounding the Tulsa PAC Trust and the scale and scope of its operation, both artistically and financially, are too wide ranging to comment on. For example, a recent article in Tulsa World cited salaries at \$116,000 annually for two prominent members of the Tulsa PAC Trust. If this is correct this, in itself alone, translates to an investment in excess of half a million dollars over a five year period. How much of this constitutes public funding, how much private and what the outcomes expected for this level of funding are create complexities where there isn't sufficient information to hand to make an informed assessment. What one can say without reservation is that the passion and dedication of Program Director, Shirley Elliot is second to none.

The proposed closure of The Henthorne PAC is a different case. Heller holds the reputation of housing the Laughing Matter Improv, one of the oldest improv troupes in Oklahoma. Heller also shares the Henthorne PAC building with Clark Youth Theatre. This is significant for with Clark Youth Theater the city's investment is not confined to the arts, or even the community. The city's real investment is in its youth. And no investment in youth is ever wasted. Evidence abounds to show that when youth engage in the arts the benefits, personally, academically and socially in terms of friendships, self-esteem and achievement are beyond measure.

Yet friendships, self-esteem and achievement aside, there are wider, pragmatic benefits when investment is made to engage young people in the arts. The most obvious being they contribute towards sustaining both the arts and the city's future. How that future is shaped is informed by the decision made now.

The value to aspiring young theatre makers of working within a dedicated company and theater space cannot be over estimated. No school, class, workshop or training program can replicate the real world, hands on application of skills and talent utilized in productions created and played before a live audience in a theater space. Having had the privilege of working and corresponding with several of the young playwrights and performers from Clark Youth Theater and of seeing many of their productions, it's easy to testify to their talent, creativity and inventiveness. Supported by a group of dedicated people, Clark Youth Theater embodies much of what constitutes both the heritage and hope of Tulsa theater.

If financial considerations need to be addressed, then let them be addressed. But let the people of Clark Youth Theatre be part of that conversation to find solutions. If their program needs to be revised then afford them the opportunity to incorporate other options. If the issue is revenue, perhaps the premises could be hired out to visiting companies when dark. The point being: there are other options to closure.

The aspiration that Tulsa can be a city of cultural excellence that will attract both a national, and perhaps international audience is a noble and realistic one. The success of both Tulsa Opera and the Tulsa Ballet testify to this. Theatrically, she's not there yet. But she can be. But not if her theatrical future is jeopardized. Tulsa possesses some incredibly talented people capable of standing shoulder to shoulder with the best anywhere in the world, with many of them to be found among the young. The recent visit of young students from Tulsa University to Dublin, Ireland, where they performed to high acclaim at The New Theatre, testifies to this.

All cuts to the arts are a double-edged sword. While they may address immediate, financial considerations, ultimately they impoverish the community and its culture and the long term costs, culturally, socially and financially, can prove considerable. To paraphrase an old saying: fail to invest, invest in failure. In the case of Clark Youth Theatre the case is even more simply stated: Tulsa's youth are Tulsa's future and Tulsa's theatrical youth are Tulsa's theatrical future. Henthorne's Clark Youth Theatre more than repays the city's investment, culturally, communally and, most importantly, in terms of Tulsa's youth. Individually, these are reason enough for Clark Youth Theatre's continued existence. Collectively, they make for a compelling and dispassionate justification.



Chris O'Rourke
Tulsa Theater Examiner

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