

AUSTIN

ARTS & LEISURE

AUGUST 1979



MORE MONEY FOR THE ARTS:
THE LEGISLATURE GETS THE PICTURE
EDUCATION FOR THE FUN OF IT
THE FRESHEST MOVIE SINCE 'MANHATTAN'

COMMENT

MATTERS OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE

Don't call up the Paramount Theater and ask what's playing for the next few weeks. For that matter, don't ask about the next several months. The theater has been closed until September, 1980, so that restoration work can be completed.

John Bernardoni and Chuck Eckerman aren't particularly thrilled with that decision handed down by the Paramount's Board of Directors, even though most of the reasoning behind it is sound. Restoration is not scheduled to resume until late November, but by shutting down during the summer months, the Board has minimized potential operational losses. To continue programming around construction periods like the theater has been doing for the past year is costly. However, by shutting down until the theater is completely restored, the Board is running the risk that the public momentum behind the restoration campaign, which built so grandly over the last several months, will die, and the city's love affair with the theater must be renewed. The current strategy, thus, could also be costly.

Yet perhaps the most regrettable ramification of the shut-down concerns the relationship of Bernardoni and Eckerman with the theater. Lack of theater income has meant drastic staff reductions. (Indeed, only a skeletal management staff is necessary.) Bernardoni is being retained on a part-time basis as a consultant both to the Board and to the architects through April, 1980. Eckerman, however, has left the theater and is now working for a film production company headquartered in Chicago. He is happy to report that the job looks promising, and the nature of the business is such that he should be able to maintain Austin as his home base.

Since Bernardoni and Eckerman — along with former partner Steve Scott — took over the then-decaying Paramount in April, 1975, they have flirted with personal bankruptcy and mountainous pressures that would have caused many a psyche to buckle. Starvation budgets and 100-hour work

weeks have not been uncommon. But their dedication finally paid off when large federal and local grants and donations began to insure that the theater would indeed be restored.

But the partners' dream for the Paramount has been more than restoration. To be more than just a pretty piece of architecture — to be a *theater* — the Paramount must provide proper programming, and it is this area which presently gives Bernardoni and Eckerman the greatest concern for the future.

"From Day One, there's been a battle between the building itself and what goes on in it," Bernardoni says.

Paramount, Inc. planned its first concentrated programming push during the 1976-77 season, with a slate of shows as diverse as "Equus," "A Little Night Music" and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. "We committed to \$100,000 worth of guarantees, with nothing to back it up," Bernardoni recalls. "At the end of the season, we had \$102,000 in receipts. If one of those shows had bombed, the theater would have gone under.

"But that's the kind of craziness you've got to have," he explains. "You've got to take those chances to make the theater worth something."

Thus, the question now is what the theater will do beginning in September, 1980. As a rental hall for outside promoters and especially for civic performance groups, the Paramount undoubtedly will continue to play a valuable role. But if it is to maximize its potential as a cultural showcase, creative programming is nothing short of mandatory.

The Paramount's Board of Directors, currently headed by Lowell Lebermann, were selected as much for their dedication to the theater and to improving the cultural atmosphere of Austin as for their ability to raise money. As they finish the laborious process of restoration, we must trust that they will exercise the foresight to bring the theater into full flower — to realize the dream of those men to whom this city owes one hell of a lot of thanks.

—Paul Beutel

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