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State of the Arts: Barre's arts are solid – like its granite

This continues a series of interviews with Vermont's arts leaders.

By Jim Lowe

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Barre's arts organizations, like the Granite City itself, are survivors.

And more importantly, despite troubled times they are optimistic about the future. That's because overcoming financial difficulty is in the DNA of this gutsy central Vermont city.

"There's a palpable sense of optimism here in downtown Barre and I think the presence of another several hundred (anticipated state) employees can't help but increase ticket sales as we move forward. We hope to ride that wave with everybody else," said Dan Casey, the Barre Opera House's executive director of eight years.

"I think people want there to be a recovery," added Sue Higby, executive director of Studio Place Arts, the Barre-Montpelier area's major visual arts institution.

"They're feeling better about their own situation, so I do think art sales and participation, just in the last six months, seems to be stronger," she said. "But I think we're just sticking our toe into the recovery process and that we don't really have a complete picture of what people will be experiencing over the next couple of years."

Both institutions seem to be miracles in an area that just now seems to be recovering from the downturn in the granite industry.

Built in 1899 as part of City Hall, the 650-seat Barre Opera House lay fallow for years before being rediscovered in the 1980s. Efforts by area theater and music people led to an eventual multimillion-dollar historic renovation that created the region's most important concert hall.

Today, the Opera House is home to its own seven-event Celebration Series, the Vermont Philharmonic, the state's oldest community orchestra, and the state's largest professional opera, the Green Mountain Opera Festival.

Its \$350,000 annual budget comes from events, memberships, sponsorships and some grants, with about a third from ticket sales.

"For years, we were primarily a rental facility," Casey said. "Since I've been here, we've kind of tipped the scales in the other direction a little bit. We're still doing rentals, but now we're doing 'Barre Opera House presents' shows. These are programs that, as the year progresses, often

become available and we are able to negotiate really good fees.”

Studio Place Arts opened in 2000 after a collection of central Vermont artists banded together to rescue one of Main Street’s oldest buildings. The result was three galleries, one on each floor, classrooms and a series of studios to be rented to artists. Each year, SPA presents some 20 original exhibitions — free to the public, attracting 8,000 to 10,000 visitors — along with art classes, in addition to providing space to other arts efforts.

Today’s \$150,000 annual gross budget comes from individuals, grants, business supporters, tuition, a small number of art sales, and rents from artist studios. The budget seems smaller than presentation organizations because it doesn’t charge admission to its exhibitions.

“Nothing is over 30 percent,” Higby said. “You never want one sector to have too much play in your budget, or else you’re cutting your feet off.”

Unlike most of Vermont’s arts organizations, SPA receives no government funding.

“We got some (Vermont Arts Council) funding about six years ago,” she said.

According to Higby, visual arts receive nearly the smallest slice of the arts philanthropy pie after, perhaps, poetry.

“So there is very little money that is actually directed to the area which SPA occupies,” Higby said. “In addition, we do not charge fees to come in and enjoy what we do — with the exception of very inexpensive tuition.”

Education and community outreach are big parts of both organizations. SPA offers more than 120 individual classes that draw some 900 participants. Other groups use the space as well, including the Washington County Family Center.

For five years, Vermont ARC, for disabled teens and adults, has been meeting every week at SPA to create art, culminating in its annual exhibit at the Vermont Statehouse.

“We have free classes for children on Saturday afternoons throughout the year — and they can range from eight to 15 participants,” Higby said.

The Barre Opera House recently instituted a formal student matinee series.

“In the past we’ve done them here and there but now we’re doing a minimum of four of those a year,” Casey said. “We also instituted summer camps last summer and they were a great success. We filled both of them — about 40 kids. So we’ll be looking to increase our educational workshops in the summer and theater workshops in the winter. People have responded really enthusiastically.”

The recession hit both the Opera House and SPA, but not immediately, and not in the same way.

“We did pretty well for the first years. I thought we had dodged the bullet,” Casey said. “Finally, last year, we saw a dip in our ticket sales of 15 or 20 percent. And we saw a bit of a drop-off in rentals, particularly in the last two or three years.”

Higby added, “The initial effect was that people weren’t taking vacations so, for the first two years, people were staying home from vacations and taking art classes. But people have limited tolerance for recession so, by year three and four, people were drifting more from their traditional spending habits.

“That means we saw a drop in signing up for classes by year three and four,” she said. “And people didn’t renew their memberships as promptly as they did in previous years.”

How Casey and Higby responded was also different, in part because of the different natures of their organizations.

“I would say, generally speaking, eight years ago, many fewer steps were needed to finalize any kind of funding relationship,” Higby said. “What a recession does is it creates a setting in which a director spends a lot more time seeking out, trying to find paid funding. It’s just a different mood.”

Casey’s approach was to revert to more mainstream programming.

“When people have less disposable income they’re a little less likely to take a risk in what they spend money on tickets for,” he said. “So one of the things we have done is programmed more recognizable names – unfortunately, especially for emerging artists.

“Somebody who already has a track record that’s well known has the ability to draw more,” he said. “So we’ve started to program more recognizable names in the last couple of years and it’s served us well.”

Higby’s approach to programming was quite different — but, then, SPA doesn’t sell tickets.

“Sometimes when you enter a recession, as an organization you start dumbing down programs or playing it safe,” she said. “I’m really pleased to say we dug our heels in and remained very focused on doing the things that have to be done to be a solid organization.”

She added, “We are the only art center that has a ‘freedom of expression policy’ — that alone is a huge responsibility.”

There are also challenges for the future. The Barre Opera House, after 20 to 30 years of wear and tear on its renovated facility, along with the need for some more modernization, will likely require a capital campaign. But Casey is optimistic.

“The big part of our mission is to create community, and I think we’ve been successful with that,” he said. “We have about 300 members, we have a loyal cadre of business supporters who sponsor shows and participate in our banner program. We feel really fortunate that there’s an

appreciation in the community for what we do.”

“I see our organization continuing to set the pace,” Higby said. “I think Studio Place Arts is an outstanding model. We definitely work hard at including more great artists, and more people who want to learn about the arts. So I don’t see this as being a static organization — we’re constantly pushing.”

SPA’s success comes from the same thing as the Barre Opera House — its community.

“Everybody matters,” Higby said. “We listen, we make adjustments, we produce really great programs. People always say SPA is the art center with a soul. I am really proud of that.”