

Small-theater owners think plans of Cultural Foundation are too grand

By TOM JACOBS
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What's a good size for an Equity theater? Operators of the local Equity-waiver houses who are thinking of expansion talk in terms of a 300- to 400-seat house.

So why is the Cultural Foundation, the non-profit organization raising money to build two performing arts centers in the Valley, planning to build theaters ranging from 650 to 2,500 seats?

"Our studies say that's what's needed," executive director Madeleine Landry said.

The theater people disagree.

"There is a crying need for mid-size houses," said Sylvia Walden, co-artistic director of Room for Theatre. "It seems strange they're building such a large facility."

A 350-seat theater would be "highly manageable," said Elaine Moe, artistic director of the Megaw Theatre. "You can hit a possible break-even on it. It's economically feasible."

"People like intimacy," added Megaw producer Sydney Mac Morrison. "You put in a 750-seat house — people don't like that

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— Sydney Mac Morrison
Megaw Theatre producer

anymore. They're all so used to television. They're used to being close. People don't want to pay \$35 and bring their binoculars."

The Equity-waiver operators agreed that the sort of theaters the Cultural Foundation is considering — a 650-seat and a 1,500-seat theater at Warner Center in Woodland Hills, and a 2,500-seat concert hall in the Sepulveda Basin — would only work for traveling shows.

"The Cultural Foundation is not into resident theater companies," lamented Laura Zucker, artistic director of the Back Alley Theatre. "They're into

big touring productions."

"There are enough houses in Los Angeles for the major road shows that are touring through," Moe said.

Landry contends the theater complexes actually could accommodate both. The larger theaters basically will host touring attractions, such as music ensembles and dance troupes, she said. But the 650-seat hall could accommodate local theatrical productions.

"You can build the theater so it can be easily closed off," she said.

Landry said the foundation had discussions with Actors' Alley Repertory Theatre about providing it a home. But the foundation board ultimately decided not to invite any one company to use the facility until plans for the theaters are finalized.

Though in general she supports the foundation's efforts, Zucker considers that backward thinking.

"The theater has got to start with the programming," she said. "You've got to know what you're going to present (in the facility). If you don't start with that premise, you end up with white elephants."