

Theater May Lose Its Home

By JOYCE McKENZIE

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TEMPLE TERRACE - Supporters of Masque Community Theatre have found themselves in the midst of two real-life dramas, one for which they are grateful and another that is causing them major concern.

On June 17, the city council approved the theater's request for a \$3,000 civic improvement matching grant it used to purchase drywall, studs and insulation to construct a floor-to-ceiling portable partition to separate the rear section of the building into two sections. Its purpose is to close off an area that houses one of the theater's malfunctioning air conditioners from the space in which the air conditioning unit works and where the Toast of Tampa show chorus and The Academy, a men's barbershop choral group, hold their weekly rehearsals.

Joe LoPinto, president of the board of directors for the nonprofit theater group, said the wall was a relatively inexpensive alternative to purchasing a new air-conditioning unit for the city-owned building on North 56th Street in the downtown redevelopment district. Considering Masque collects revenue from the choruses and a church group that meets there on Sundays and it pays the city \$1 a month to rent the facility, the partition made good sense.

"We made it so it can be taken down and used elsewhere after the city sells the land and the time comes for us to vacate the building," said LoPinto, who noted that because of several delays in the redevelopment agreement process he surmised the theater would remain in the home it has occupied since 2004 at least until the middle of next year.

But he recently received an e-mail from Mike Marshall, the city's redevelopment director, informing him that the project's developer, a partnership of Ram Development Co. and Pinnacle Realty Advisors, wants possession of the building by the end of this year to accommodate a pending tenant.

LoPinto was shocked, especially because he is familiar with No. 14 on the 21-point Downtown Redevelopment Framework document approved by city council in September 2005.

It reads: "The community arts center to remain on site until a permanent home is constructed at a site not yet determined."

"We just want what's fair. We have no home to go to, although we as a board have gone from place to place looking for one," LoPinto said. "The last thing I want is a group ... of crying kids. This theater has meant a lot to them."

Ruth Kegel, Masque's vice president of public relations and a longtime supporter, agreed.

"When the kids were told this, you could hear a pin drop," said Kegel, also the director of the upcoming "Beauty and the Beast," which has a cast of 52 children and drew 117 youngsters to its audition. "We make it affordable at only \$25 for the summer, and the kids enjoy it so much. It's important it keeps going, because otherwise you lose the momentum."

Temple Terrace resident Virginia Grissom, a single mother of three daughters involved with the theater, called the potential closing of Masque a "travesty."

"It would be devastating. ... I can't imagine not having it," she said. "My girls have learned everything they know about theater from Masque, and it's affordable to me as a single parent."

Grissom's 10-year-old daughter, Kara, is appreciative of the acting skills she has developed during her time spent at the theater. She also cherishes the many friendships she has made.

"It's almost my home in the summer, and it would be horrible if it closes," she said.

Nicu Brouillette of Tampa Palms, a soon-to-be senior at Berkeley Preparatory School in Tampa, has taken on lead roles in three productions at Masque, including Gaston in Disney's 1991 classic "Beauty and the Beast."

"What I've really enjoyed is the people," said Brouillette, 17, who hopes to pursue a college major in theater. "I've spent three summers in a row there, and it's been awesome. I would be very disappointed if they closed it before they find somewhere to move."

Masque's immediate past president, Mary Jane Neale, said it has taken several years to build a following.

"But sometimes you have to be careful what you wish for because now we don't know where we'll go from here," Neale said. "In addition to potentially losing the children, our next biggest thing is losing our renters. They've helped pay our expenses."

LoPinto encourages all Masque enthusiasts to attend the 5 p.m. Tuesday meeting in the council chambers at city hall. "This will be your chance to speak out and let the city know how you feel about the thought of Masque theater being gone," he said.

City Manager Kim Leinbach said that unfortunately much has changed since the redevelopment framework document was put in place.

"We'll certainly try to work with them, but today we're facing a much different economy," he said. "I think our city officials have shown our support of the theater by renting the space to them; and remember we're looking at an arts and education center on a much larger scope. But at this juncture, we don't know if that will even happen."

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Meeting to discuss the future of Masque Community Theatre

WHERE: Council chambers at Temple Terrace City Hall, 11250 N. 56th St.

WHEN: 5 p.m. Tuesday

INFORMATION: E-mail masque@masqueonline.net.