

## **Performing Arts Bloom at RCC**

By William Nicoson

*“Then to the well-trod stage anon...” – John Milton, L’Allegro*

The stage at Reston Community Center is as well-trod by actors, dancers, and musicians as any stage a poet might celebrate. Better still, the seats facing the stage have recently become increasingly well-occupied and the theater treasury increasingly well-nourished.

I talked about this happy phenomenon with Leila Gordon, RCC’s Performing Arts Director. She told me that attendance in the ‘97-‘98 season increased by 9% over ‘96-‘97, and estimated that ‘98-‘99 attendance would be 20% above ‘96-‘97. I expressed surprise at gains in attendance during the height of renovation of Hunters Woods Center, which deprived RCC of convenient parking during development. Leila Gordon thought getting to RCC performances became an adventurous challenge which in the end was turned to RCC’s advantage by both loyalty and curiosity.

Publicity surrounding RCC’s planned expansion to space in Lake Anne Center may also have added new members to RCC audiences, members who might have wondered, with all the fuss, what they were missing. A marked increase in ticket purchases from North Point was noted. And in the preference poll for RCC governors last October, a majority of votes cast in North Point favored candidates supporting expansion to Lake Anne.

Undeterred by inconvenience and encouraged by experience, audiences also accepted an expanded range of ticket prices during ‘97-‘98. Revenues from RCC offerings that season increased by 34% above ‘96-‘97, reflecting not only increased attendance but escalation of top ticket prices from \$15 to \$25.

Leila Gordon has acted as arts commissar for RCC since 1984. Before her arrival the booking philosophy was “get whatever will come”. At her recommendation, RCC changed that policy to give priority to local organizations, and that priority remains in place. Some 10 local organizations offer performances at RCC, including 2 groups teaching classical ballet, 2 groups teaching modern dance, 2 choral groups, a group featuring Renaissance and early American music, a group offering exclusively musical theater, an alliance of music instructors offering student recitals, and Reston Community Players (RCP) offering 4 productions annually, each over weekends during 3 or 4 weeks.

By my count, RCC offered 64 events for local organizations and 62 outside productions in the two seasons ending August ‘98. Because of rehearsals and repeat performances by RCP, the RCC theater was in fact used far more frequently for local events than outside productions. That’s consistent both with RCC’s priorities and with the limited economic opportunities for outside attractions offered by a 300-seat theater.

As Town Center's final phase is planned, there have been proposals to include in the cultural center complex, perhaps beneath the adjacent urban park, a theater of sufficient capacity to attract major traveling productions by theater and dance companies and musical ensembles. It's even been suggested that Reston might establish its own professional theater company. By virtue of its experience, RCC should play a major role in the future of performing arts in Town Center.

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