

Economy still weighs heavily on art scene

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Note: Dark financial clouds remained stubbornly in place in 2012

Looking back on 2012, it's hard not to notice there was a whole pile of bad news in the arts world here this year.

There may be an economic recovery going on somewhere else, but the sluggish economy was probably the most significant arts story of the year in Eugene. Arts groups big and small continued to struggle financially.

The Oregon Mozart Players left the Hult Center, where they had performed as a resident company since 1987, to try to save money.

Eugene Opera finished its season \$100,000 in the red, though General Director Mark Beudert said last week the company is halfway back to solvency and expects to finish the coming season in the black.

Eugene's visual arts world, too, got even drabber when Opus VII closed its doors in April, continuing a dismal trend for galleries here over the past few years.

There was a glimmer of good news, though, as the Karin Clarke Gallery - closed since 2010 - reopened in the fall for a show by painter Adam Grosowsky. The work sold well, and Clarke, coming off a year of personal tragedy, is considering staying open permanently.

Despite financial gloom, a lot of great work got presented this year.

Eugene Opera's splendid "Nixon in China" in March showed decisively that Eugene can play in the operatic big leagues.

It's a challenging show, and one that requires an audience willing to invest time and energy in the music. But by the time the curtain call arrived at the performance that I attended, I gladly would have sat through it again.

Staging the contemporary John Adams work may have helped push the opera closer to insolvency, but the production was beautiful and engaging. Now, Eugene Opera just has to figure out how to do contemporary work - such as this spring's "Dead Man Walking" - without going broke.

Symphony weathers storm

Without taking on quite such a huge challenge, Eugene Symphony has managed to weather most of the financial storm, largely because of the deep commitment of its audience over the long haul. At a typical symphony show, about 1,700 of the 2,500 seats in the Silva Concert Hall are taken up by season-ticket holders.

That means the symphony has continued its steady improvement of the past decade, most recently under Danail Rachev, without the interruption of financial drama.

The Oregon Bach Festival, also less battered by the economy, has managed its own steady transition from the leadership of founding Artistic Director Helmuth Rilling, who leaves after this summer's festival, to Matthew Halls.

And the John G. Shedd Institute for the Arts, despite small audiences for some shows, continues to bring in such sparkling acts as Nellie McKay, who was here twice during the year, and audience-pleasers like Hugh Laurie, in addition to forging ahead on its mission to keep alive the Great American Songbook in all its forms.

In visual art, the Leslie Dill show that took over the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art this fall was at the top of my list for the year.

The New York artist filled the Schnitzer's big Barker Gallery with her amazing blend of fashion and drawing in "Leslie Dill's Poetic Visions." She also gave an absolutely compelling and intimate talk about her work, which made it all seem accessible and fun in addition to its strange beauty.

Lord Leebrick moves

In theater, Lord Leebrick Theatre Company defied the sour economy by actually completing its new downtown theater on, yes, Broadway. The company is in the process of moving into its new quarters from the longtime home on Charnelton Street

It will open "Next to Normal" in the new space Jan. 18.

A lot of strength in the arts world recently has grown from what might be called a "new normal," with a stripped-down kind of production.

Groups such as Chamber Music Amici and Cascade Concert Opera are putting on quality shows with low overhead, keeping classical music accessible in hard times. In visual art, Eugene Storefront Art Project, the Occupy Eugene of visual art, is growing into a credible organization that shows a lot of local artists' work on what amounts to practically no budget.

In theater, Fred Crafts' Radio Redux has been doing a hybrid concert/staged version of radio shows. And the Shedd has been offering concert versions of early 20th century musicals with good success.

And in classical music, Brian McWhorter's Orchestra Next, a training orchestra that provided live music for the Eugene Ballet's "Nutcracker," is a great example of making do with less.

Tragedy and controversy

And there was off-stage tragedy this year.

Anne Dhu McLucas, the former University of Oregon School of Music and Dance dean, was murdered in September along with her domestic partner, Jim Gillette. Gillette's son, Johan, is in custody on murder charges.

And finally, we have the weirdly ugly. Celebrity classical composer Osvaldo Golijov had a public stumble in February when the Eugene Symphony performed his newly commissioned short work

"Sidereus."

Two listeners in the Hult Center audience recognized the "new" piece as very similar - almost note-for-note-identical, actually - to an entirely different piece credited to Michael Ward-Bergeman. The two composers, who are friends, later said they had collaborated on the music.

Golijov continues to struggle with delivering commissions. Last month, he said he couldn't deliver a promised violin concerto in time for its January premiere by the Philadelphia Orchestra.

The piece originally was to have premiered with the L.A. Philharmonic in May 2011. Two other scheduled premieres, in London and Berlin, also were scrapped.

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