That's Entertainment

Options boom for arts patrons

By Janelle Brown

Turn down the lights. Rev up the music. Settle back in your chair, and enjoy a simply marvelous performance, right here in Boise.

On grand stages and in small intimate settings, actors, musicians, singers, dancers and impresarios are making us laugh, cry and reach for our pocketbooks. The performing arts are booming in Boise. When it comes to entertainment, The City of Trees delivers.

"There have always been some excellent artists in Boise, but the depth and variety has increased a lot in recent years," says reporter Marianne Flagg, an '81 BSU graduate who has covered arts and entertainment at *The Idaho Statesman* for the past decade. "The argument there's nothing to do in Boise isn't true anymore."

Stroll through downtown Boise, or simply pick up a newspaper, and it's quickly apparent what Flagg means. There's plenty going on here,

Increasing attendance figures at Idaho Shakespeare Festival productions are indicative of the growing interest in performing arts in Boise.
Steve Bly photo.

CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

BSU graduate Marianne Flagg has documented the changes in Boise's art scene as a reporter for The Idaho Statesman.

from performances by Opera Idaho, Idaho Dance Theater and the Boise Philharmonic to community theater from Stage Coach and Knock 'Em Dead to concerts, plays and musicals at Boise State University and shows by national touring artists. And that's not even counting the start-up theater groups and bands playing on-again, off-again gigs at trendy bars and coffeehouses.

"It's an exciting time to be in Boise," says Jim Jirak, a BSU music professor and director of the Boise Master Chorale. Adds Kent Neely, chairman of BSU's theatre arts department: "The momentum is definitely growing. What's happening here is very healthy."

Momentum is a key word for Boise's performing arts groups, which need visibility, financial support, artistic growth and adequate performing space if they are to thrive in the years ahead. In an era of dwindling government funding of the arts and increasing competition for consumers' entertainment dollars, success is never a certainty. But this spring, confidence in Boise's art scene is running nearly as high as runoff in the Boise River. By many measures, a lot is going right.

Audiences are getting bigger. Idaho Shakespeare Festival's audience jumped from 19,000 in 1991 to 28,000 in 1996. Idaho Dance Theater, BSU's professional company-in-residence, saw audiences for its Boise shows grow from 750 two years ago to about 2,800 people this past season. Opera Idaho sold out the Morrison Center with full-price tickets for the first time ever for its January performance of *La Boheme*. Audiences at BSU music department events increased by one-third in 1996-97. And a record 4,815 people attended the BSU theatre department production of *Cabaret* in February.

Artistic quality is also escalating, as budgets increase and more performers are attracted to Boise's lifestyle. "We've gone from being a pretty good community orchestra to a first-rate metropolitan orchestra," says James Ogle, artistic director of the Boise Philharmonic. "We're blessed with an amazing talent pool."

Idahoans — and particularly those in Ada County — are thirsty for even more performing arts. According to a 1996 survey conducted by the BSU Social Science Research Center, 89 percent of Ada County residents surveyed want to attend more plays. Nearly half of Ada County residents are interested in more ballet. The survey also found strong support for more classical concerts, jazz and opera.

Boise's booming population, now upward of 150,000, only partly explains the increasing interest. More variety is also attracting new segments of Boise's population to buy tickets for concerts and plays. Outreach programs in schools and special performances for families and seniors are making the arts more accessible and less intimidating. A new sense of respect between the different groups is kindling excellence.

"Six years ago, we were very divided," says Tamara Cameron, executive director of Opera Idaho. "That has changed. Now, we're looking for new ways to collaborate."

Idaho Dance Theater is among the groups that has faced the challenges that come with success. Founded in 1989 by Alfred and Marla Hansen, IDT is known for its bold choreography and stylistic diversity. Until two years ago, the Hansens and Carl Rowe oversaw both the business and artistic sides of their company. But that changed in May 1995 when a private donation allowed IDT to hire a managing director, Bill Stephan, a '94 BSU graduate.

"It made it possible for us to keep going," says Marla Hansen, a BSU theatre arts professor who now devotes her time to working with dancers and creating new choreography. "We were in a growth phase, and there simply weren't enough hours to get everything done."

From her new offices in the Esther Simplot Performing Arts Academy Annex, Ballet Idaho's Debra Paris describes the financial and artistic gains her company, formerly American Festival Ballet, has made since its alliance with the Eugene Ballet three years ago.

"Our budget is balanced. Our education programs are expanding," says Paris, the group's managing director. In addition, the Eugene merger helped move the company to a higher performance level by bringing new dancers and artistic director Toni Pimble to town.

For the Idaho Shakespeare Festival, change is centered on a swath of undeveloped land along the Boise River east of town. That's where the company, now in the midst of a capital campaign, plans to build a new amphitheater to open in summer 1998.

"We're in transition and it's real exciting," says artistic director Charles Fee. "The new amphitheater is going to be a wonderful place to perform."

This past year saw Boise Opera change its name to Opera Idaho and stage two grand operas in the Morrison Center. The Boise Philharmonic hired assistant conductor Sylvin Frémaux. Idaho Theater for Youth performed under the direction of a new artistic director, Pam Sterling.

For Stage Coach Theatre, this past season brought new pressures. The community theater group will lose its home in July when Federal Way is widened. "We've chosen to look at this as an opportunity," says business manager Kelly Weston, a '94 BSU graduate. "We've had lots of calls about possible locations. We'll find a new space."

Weston's upbeat assessment is probably not unrealistic. Resources run deep here. Corporate contributions, private endowments, government funds and other donations provide substantial support for the performing arts. Roughly half the operating budgets for many professional groups come from donations and other unearned income. An army of volunteers fill crucial roles, both on and off stage.

"Boise is a city where public service is expected," observes Shakespeare's Fee. "The level of support is truly astounding."

The Esther Simplot Performing Arts Academy and the new Annex which opened last fall are examples of that support. The state-of-the-art facilities house the Philharmonic, Ballet Idaho, Opera Idaho, a ballet academy and youth symphony, and are used by many other groups. The buildings are funded by contributions from corporate and private donors and matching funds from J.R. and Esther Simplot.

The Simplot buildings provide more than just a physical home. The shared space has also allowed groups to interact in ways that weren't possible when they were stashed in different offices around town.

"You tend to get this tunnel vision when you're working on your own," says Ballet Idaho's Paris. Now, Paris and others say casual encounters at the drinking fountain or in the hallway have led to a new level of understanding about each others' work.

PROFILE

CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

Promotion and Progress

By Brad Carlson

Call her an "arts activist" and Royanne (Klein) Minskoff will laugh. But the Boise resident is relentless in her quest to ensure that Boise's growing arts community continues to flourish.

Her resume of arts-related volunteer work over the past decade includes service as an advisory board member for Ballet Idaho, and a member of the IJA Productions (now Idaho Performing Arts) and Idaho Shakespeare Festival boards. She helps to guide the new Log Cabin Literary Center and has served as a community representative to the Morrison Center for the Performing Arts board.

Minskoff's involvement in the arts goes back to her Boise State student days in the late 1970s, when she was involved in several theatre arts productions as well as the former Theatre In A Trunk performing group.

She subsequently moved to New York, where she worked for the marketing division of a Fortune 200 company, bringing arts graduates into entry-level corporate positions. She returned to Boise in 1986 and has been a major player on the local arts scene ever since.

"Our arts world has grown tremendously since I left BSU as an undergrad," she says. "Quality has improved immensely and there are more arts venues. It really feels like we have professional arts going on in Boise. And it seems we have a nice balance in the state."

Royanne and her husband Alan co-chair the Idaho Shakespeare Festival capital campaign to raise $3.5 million for construction of a new amphitheater and interpretive center in the Barber Pools area along the Boise River. The funding drive garnered $1.2 million in 1996 and has set a $1.5 million goal for this year. The new facility is targeted to open for the 1998 season.

"This is more than just a festival for the Boise community. We have presented more than 1,000 performances to more than 300,000 patrons since the festival's founding in 1977," she says, noting that people come from throughout the region for the festival.

Minskoff, who works in finance and marketing, still finds time for the hard work that promoting the arts requires. "It is very time-consuming but is absolutely valuable. There are so many more opportunities than when I was growing up in Boise. I want it to grow, and continue to improve in quality.

"I have children, and I see the value of them being able to enjoy the arts." ❑

PROFILE

Light Shines on Prescott

By Reneé White

Rebecca Prescott hasn't finished her undergraduate degree yet, but already she is making her dreams come true. Raised in the small agricultural community of Jerome, the Boise State University senior wants to perform on Broadway, and at 23, she is on her way.

Acting wasn't in Prescott's plans when she first enrolled at BSU as a music major. But, a performance in *A Christmas Carol* alongside theatre arts professor Richard Klautsch changed that.

At Klautsch's urging, Prescott decided to pursue a second degree in theatre arts.

Since then, Prescott has performed with the Idaho Shakespeare Festival in *The Tempest* and *King Henry IV*, has had leading roles in *Little Lu Lu* and *Charlotte's Web* for Idaho Theater for Youth, and has lit up the stage in BSU's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and *Cabaret*.

Having done commercials, voice-overs, plays, teaching and conference coordinating, Prescott says, "I will leave BSU with experience in every genre of this field. You wouldn't think you would have those kinds of opportunities in Idaho."

As a member of the Idaho Theater for Youth teaching staff, Prescott has learned how to teach eager young actors how to express themselves on stage. She was the student coordinator for the 1997 Invitational Theater Arts Festival, organizing a statewide convention for Idaho high school students. And last spring she received the prestigious Brown Scholarship, BSU's highest academic award.

Having grown up on a cattle ranch, she knows the meaning of hard work. Summers were spent driving cattle, which meant getting up at 6 a.m. and working all day. She used that work ethic at an early age to sharpen her performance skills.

"Rebecca has a tremendous amount of motivation," says Klautsch. "She will be very successful at whatever she sets out to do, whether that be on stage in New York City or in Hollywood films."

So watch the horizon for Rebecca Prescott; she may be Broadway's next star. ❑

(Reneé White of Reno, Nev., is a senior majoring in communication at BSU. She works part time in the BSU Office of News Services.)

That's not to say there isn't competition. While on one hand, as BSU's Neely puts it, "the best thing for more theater is more theater," most folks don't have unlimited time and resources. They make choices about where they'll spend their discretionary income. Corporations and private donors make similar decisions. Those choices shape what's being offered in Boise — and when.

A heavily marked-up calendar in the offices of Idaho Performing Arts, formerly IJA Productions, offers a compelling lesson in competition, scheduling and audience limits. Kim Jeffries, executive director of the nonprofit group that brings national touring acts to Boise, flips the calendar to November 1996. "Just look how much was going on," she says, shaking her head.

The calendar is crammed with a list of different performances around town, scrawled in different colored ink. Jeffries says she knew November would be busy when she booked the dance group Manhattan Tap and the musical *Crazy For You*. What she hadn't counted on was recording superstar Neil Diamond coming to town for two sold-out shows at the BSU Pavilion. There was simply more going on than even motivated fans could attend, Jeffries says. As a result, some shows, including IPA's, suffered.

Boise's marketplace is changing fast, Jeffries says, as national touring groups identify Boise as a lucrative venue. The increasing outside competition is one reason IPA scaled back its performing schedule during the past season, and will present one-night shows in 1997-98. And IPA won't bring in shows such as ballet that compete head-on with other local groups.

"We grew exponentially in our first five years," Jeffries says about IPA, which was founded by Jack Alotto as IJA in 1990. "We ended up saturating the marketplace. We've scaled way back, so we can create demand."

Performance space continues to be a major issue. While the 2,000-seat Morrison Center works well for the Philharmonic, touring companies and some other groups, there is a growing consensus that Boise needs a theater about half that size. A smaller space would allow Opera Idaho and Ballet Idaho to stage productions for more than the one-night runs they currently are limited to because of the Morrison Center's size. More performing space might also allow groups more scheduling flexibility, an issue because there are so many competing events in town.

"Finding a night we can perform that isn't already glutted with activities is difficult," says Marla Hansen of IDT, which performs in the heavily booked Special Events Center at BSU, a 435-seat facility. "Boise needs more performing space."

The idea of building an 800-seat theater has been brewing for years, and the city's

five-year Metro Arts Plan, released last fall, calls for a small to midsized hall. But so far, there are no concrete plans. *The Statesman*'s Flagg says it's likely that Boise's next new performing space will be a 300-seat black box theater. Tentative plans are in the works to build such a facility in the Eighth Street Marketplace complex.

Two new large facilities will also affect Boise's performing arts scene, because they will allow more national touring acts to perform here. The 12,000-seat Idaho Center in Nampa opened in February. And the WestCoast Hotel and Bank of America Centre, scheduled to open later this year, will include a 5,000-seat arena.

Charles Spencer, general manager of the BSU Pavilion, says the additional venues bring a new level of competition. "We'll continue on the track of keeping the Pavilion the premier facility in the state," he says.

If there are clouds on the horizon for Boise's arts scene, they concern money. "We have the ability to grow here," observes Flagg. "But will we be willing to pay for it?"

Costs of live performance are going up, and technology is doing little, if anything, to make things cheaper. While Boise's ticket prices are modest compared to larger Northwest cities, there are questions about how much price-hiking Boise audiences will tolerate. At the same time, many groups are finding that season tickets are an increasingly hard sell because patrons don't want to commit to programs that are months away.

"To be where we are today in four or five years, we would have to run very fast," says the Philharmonic's Ogle. "But we don't want to just be here. We're ready for a quantum leap."

The "leap" Ogle envisions is a core orchestra of about 40 full-time musicians. At present, most Philharmonic members are paid on a "per service" basis and hold day jobs elsewhere. A sizable endowment is needed to make Ogle's dream a reality.

Other Boise groups also have dreams that will take funds and vision. Idaho's Shakespeare Festival wants year-round performing space. Idaho Theater for Youth, housed in temporary space in the Eighth Street Marketplace, dreams of a permanent home. Opera Idaho has ideas for collaborating with other groups that require additional funds. Idaho Dance Theater would like to place its dancers on longer contracts.

It will take creativity, new alliances, a strong local economy and continued support from audiences for those dreams and many others to come true. But as the lights go down on Boise's stages and the shows begin, anything seems possible.

"What we have here is worth preserving," says BSU's Jirak. "It's vital that the quality and participation keep pace with Boise's growth." ❑

ARTISTS, PROGRAMS LINKED TO BSU

By Janelle Brown

When the curtain closed for the final time on BSU's production of the musical *Cabaret*, director Richard Klautsch thought the show was over.

That was before the fan mail started arriving at his office in the BSU theatre arts department.

"We've had a huge response," says Klautsch. "People were essentially surprised at how professional the show was."

The accolades for *Cabaret*, and the fact it drew a record crowd for a BSU musical strengthens the ties between the university and city arts scenes.

Cabaret *is an example of BSU's outreach in the community.*

Those ties are already considerable. On some level, BSU is involved with most performing arts groups in town. Faculty, students and alumni perform with Opera Idaho, the Boise Philharmonic, Idaho Shakespeare Festival and jazz, classical music and theater ensembles.

Thousands of people come on campus each year to attend concerts, recitals, plays, festivals and workshops, including the upcoming SummerFest outdoor concert series in July. Groups such as Idaho Dance Theater, a professional company-in-residence and the University/Community Orchestra, which includes both community and student musicians, bring town and gown together in innovative ways. And BSU faculty provide other leadership roles, directing the Boise Master Chorale, the Treasure Valley Concert Band and other groups.

Boise State also has many outreach programs, including a Community School where BSU music students teach young players, a Partners in Education program with Maple Grove Elementary and Scene Change, a program to assist high school drama students and their teachers.

"Boise State makes a big difference for us," says Terri Dillion, education director for Idaho Theater for Youth. BSU provides classroom space for ITY's drama school, and BSU faculty and students have directed and acted in the professional touring company.

In addition, Dillion says BSU helps "create an environment where the arts are important and valuable."

That's not to say that things are perfect between BSU and the rest of Boise's performing arts community. "There is still somewhat of a town-gown split," says Kris Tucker, executive director of the Boise City Arts Commission.

The perception by some in the community that BSU events are only for those on campus contributes to that split, says Tucker. And so do the access problems created by limited parking for the Morrison Center and other venues.

Tucker raises issues that university faculty and officials say they're also concerned about, and that they're working on new ways to address. The parking issues are particularly thorny, especially in light of Boise's booming growth. "No one wants their name on a parking garage," one BSU official dryly noted, when asked to speculate about private funding.

Despite these and other issues, there are signs that BSU's growing influence will keep pace with Boise's booming art scene. Events such as the Gene Harris jazz festival that will debut in the BSU Pavilion in spring 1998 are broadening what the university offers. So are the guest artists who visit Boise State to perform or to direct groups such as the SummerFest orchestra or April production of *The Winter's Tale*.

"We are always looking for new ways to interact with the community," says Jim Cook, chairman of the music department, as he talks about some of the 183 recitals, concerts and other music performances this year. "There's a lot going on." ❑