Arts, anyone?

Troupes adopt marketing strategies to attract new audiences

By Edie Jeffers

No more Mr. Cosmopolitan for the Boise Philharmonic's Jim Ogle. The oft tuxedo-clad maestro isn't afraid to trade his tails for a double-knit leisure suit in order to get his message to the masses.

Like the time two years ago when the Philharmonic produced a ground-breaking television commercial to market season tickets. "Jim dressed up as the sleaziest caricature of a used car salesman that you can think of, and he pitched leasing a season seat for 88 bucks," says LaRaye O'Brien, the group's director of marketing and sales.

The underlying marketing message: The Philharmonic is for everyone. "It got the attention of people who may not have thought of coming to the Philharmonic before," says O'Brien.

In these days of shrinking funds and graying audiences, the Philharmonic isn't the only Boise performing arts group that is gearing up its marketing efforts to sell what has to be a truly innovative and bolt-you-off-your-sofa product. Some are hiring their own marketing directors, while others are turning to advertising agencies to piece together sophisticated strategies to reach new patrons.

Today's arts groups must go beyond the group that Bradley G. Morison and Julie Dalgleish call "Yeses" in their book, *Waiting In the Wings: A Larger Audience for the Arts and How to De elop It.*

"Yeses" are the people who are predisposed to the arts and more likely to make a season ticket purchase. The supply of "Yeses" is nearly exhausted according to the authors.

Local arts marketers agree, saying the challenge is to get the attention of the "Maybes." That's what led the Philharmonic to produce its clever television commercial – an effort to bring in people who wouldn't normally go to a symphony performance.

"We have to realize that subscription sales are fading out. People have trouble committing to an evening in March a year and a half from now. People have family activities to attend, and Boise has so many more entertainment events to choose from," says O'Brien.

Subscription sales are traditionally the backbone of most arts groups' marketing strategy. They also mail brochures, advertise in local newspapers, "pitch" stories about their performances to the media, and run public service announcements on radio and television. Although no element of this "marketing mix" should be ignored, these strategies alone often fall short in a market where there is a plethora of entertainment options, fine art and otherwise, and many other leisure-time options vying for attention.

As Boise continues to grow and diversify, its performing arts market will likely become even more competitive, says Ed Petkus, a Boise State marketing professor whose area of expertise is consumer behavior and advertising. To survive, groups will need to position themselves in ways to both attract and keep new patrons, he says.

"You need to treat your audience as customers, not attendees," Petkus says. "The audience needs to feel comfortable and catered to. You want the customer to fall in love with you, and not cheat on you by going to other events instead of yours."

It's also important to be unique, adds Kristen Robertson, marketing director for the Idaho Shakespeare Festival. "We don't just sell William Shakespeare, costumes and actors. You don't just see a play. You come two hours early, you chat with friends, you picnic and you may take a walk along the river.

"All the arts organizations do something a little bit different. What we offer is a whole evening experience package." And it's working. Last summer, the company's 20th season, 28,005 people attended 70 performances.

So what else has proven successful to get the potential audience member — the "Maybe" — off the couch and into a group's performance venue?

CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

Idaho Shakespeare Festival's Kristen Robertson is part of a growing cadre of professionals hired to market performing arts organizations.

Idaho Dance Theater, a professional dance company in residence at BSU, enjoyed a marketing success story late last year when it hosted "Dance Through the Decades" at the Crystal Ballroom at Boise's Hoff Building. More than 200 people dressed up and danced an entire evening away to hits from the 1940s through the 1990s. The IDT dancers gave mini-performances to the crowd throughout the evening and instructors from the Fred Astaire studio gave on-the-spot instruction for the less-than-smooth-footed.

This "warm-up" event helped reach new audience members for the fast growing dance company. Without having to commit to sitting in a concert hall seat for a couple of hours, potential audience members got to sample the IDT experience.

Managing director Bill Stephan says that the event represents the philosophy of the company. "Not only do we want people to enjoy watching creative and innovative dance, we want them to experience it."

With a 170 percent increase in audience size from the 1994-1995 season to the 1995-1996 season and ticket sales 72 percent ahead of this time last year, more Boiseans are indeed experiencing IDT.

Kent Neely, chair of the BSU theatre arts department, says the marketing techniques used by his department to promote larger

PROFILE

CHRIS SCHNEIDER PHOTO

Magic Hour Approaches

By Jackie Schnupp

Jerome, Idaho, may be a quiet little town, but it gave Richard Bean the inspiration for a big-time dream — to make movies the whole world will see.

As a kid Bean spent his free time at the Jerome Cinema watching such movies as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Star Wars*. They were great films, he says, but they weren't about the people or places he was familiar with. And those were the stories he wanted to tell.

Now 25, the 1994 BSU theatre arts graduate is working hard to raise money to shoot *Magic Hour*, his independent film that will be shot entirely in Boise and Stanley, hopefully starting this summer. Bean wrote the script and plans to direct. His actress sister Stacey has the lead. His BSU-mates Lorena Davis, Suzanne Gore and Jennifer Russell are co-producers.

The film itself was based on Bean's experience as assistant director to BSU theatre arts professor Phil Atkason on his film *Not This Part of the World*, shot two years ago in Boise.

Bean was a graduate student at Boston University when he penned the psychological thriller that "puts the audience inside the trenches of raw filmmaking.

"It explores America's addiction to film and the lengths some people will go in order to become immortalized on film. It really embraces the magic of film and what filmmaking is all about," he says.

Bean wanted a home-grown production because the support in Boise for his film and other projects is strong; even his cast and crew have agreed to work for free or very cheaply to see the movie made.

"Films have become part of our culture instead of a mere form of entertainment," he says. "Viewers want films that matter. We think our project crosses the market lines and will be important to more than one age group."

Bean credits his parents with instilling in their three children the courage and motivation to choose other-than-ordinary careers. His sister, Leslie, sings with the Seattle Opera, while Stacey makes a living as an actress in Chicago (see Page 28). "Our parents encouraged all of us to pursue a career in the arts — their attitude is pretty unique," he says.

Bean is convinced Idaho could develop its filmmaking community. And just think, he muses, "Then, Idaho film people won't ever have to go to California to work again." ❑

productions are no different than those professional organizations use.

"The emotional stakes to fill the seats can be higher. Some of the students will go on to have professional lives in theater and some will not, but for all of the actors, performing in a production on the scale of *Cabaret* is the pinnacle of their college acting career," he says. *Cabaret* was performed to a total audience of 4,815 in February.

Idaho Theater for Youth, the Boise-based troupe that presents children's theater in schools statewide, counts on the real-life needs of families who look for performing arts experiences they can enjoy together. Parents of young children are a huge segment of their "Maybe" audience. ITY has been able to captivate the attention of Boise's younger set and their parents with many playful marketing tactics, carefully targeted promotions and creative merchandising.

Diane Ragsdale, the group's former marketing director who recently moved to Sandpoint, carefully thought about her audience for each performance. "If you just think [about reaching all] families in Boise, that's too broad. I really tried to do micro-marketing — getting to the groups, organizations and stores that attract families."

Because of her strategic thinking, Ragsdale was able to market directly to groups like the Girl Scouts, Fox Kids Club and customers of Borders Books and Music. "I spent so little money on marketing *Charlotte's Web*," she says. "We thought we were going to lose $20,000. The shows sold out. The production ended up paying for itself plus a little."

The Philharmonic's O'Brien says that organization also looks toward family and children to make "Yeses" out of "Maybes."

"We're continually looking for ways to get the attention of a younger audience, those who have been oriented toward the electronic media their whole lives." The Philharmonic offers free performances that attract 14,000 fourth- and fifth-graders and its annual family concert features hands-on pre-concert family activities.

Ballet Idaho, also anxious to shed a more exclusive image, went directly to a competing entertainment outlet to get in front of "Maybes." Based on the results of a BSU Social Science Research Center study, the group learned that people 25 years and under were looking for more opportunities to see dance performances.

The company has produced a three-minute promotional spot in the style of Nike commercials that will be shown during the previews at local movie houses, a primary entertainment outlet for "Maybes" 25 and under.

Says Karla Bodnar, educational outreach director, "If I can get people in to see the dancers or get the dancers out to the people, than I don't have to sell the Ballet ... it will sell itself." ❑