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STATE OF
THE ARTS

ARE YOU NOT ENTERTAINED?

Foundations, federal grants and deep-pocketed patrons aren't enough to keep Seattle's premier arts organizations operating as they once did



Financial hard times are nothing new to opera companies, says James Robinson, who became the general and artistic director of the Seattle Opera last September. “I say opera was invented in 1608 and was in crisis in 1609. You ride the wave, figure out what to do,” he says. ¶ Robinson is part of a new cadre of Seattle arts leaders who are prioritizing business plans over productions. The numbers landed in Robinson’s favor last week. He said the company surpassed its revenue goal for its final performance of the season, the Italian classic “Tosca,” which “received uniformly positive reviews.”

Still, foundations, federal grants and deep-pocketed patrons aren’t enough to keep Seattle’s premier arts organizations operating as they once did. For many, it’s a balancing act between the programming loyal benefactors want to support and the programming that will reach new audiences.

“A year and a half ago, all I heard was, ‘How do we get back?’ It’s not about getting back somewhere,” says Bill Berry, who became executive director of the 5th Avenue Theatre in 2024 after 20 years with the organization. “We’ve got to go somewhere. We’re on a journey.”

Berry, Robinson and the heads of the Seattle Art Museum and Seattle Men’s and Women’s Choruses – all of whom started their jobs during or after the Covid-19 pandemic – sat down with the Puget Sound Business Journal in February to discuss the state of their arts organizations, evolving business models and the challenge of attracting a new generation of patrons.

‘They’re not coming back’
Scott Stulen started as CEO of the Seattle Art Museum last August and leads a staff of more than 300 people across three locations – the downtown museum, the Seattle Asian Art Museum and the Olympic Sculpture Park.

Foundations have traditionally been the backbone of financial support for the arts. But Stulen says many foundations shifted over to support health care, mental health and social justice issues during the pandemic.

“And they’re not coming back,” he says.

But perhaps the biggest change for these arts organizations has been a shift in demand from memberships or subscriptions to single-ticket sales, a less reliable way to keep money flowing.

Earlier this year, the Seattle Opera pulled back advertising for its production of “The Magic Flute,”

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Lianna Haroutounian performs as Floria Tosca opposite Rame Lahaj as Mario Cavaradossi in Seattle Opera’s production of “Tosca.”

SUNNY MARTIN