



Our view: New theater another plum for downtown Salem

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Government, retailers, manufacturers, newspapers — no one has been immune to the impact of the Great Recession, which we all hope is nearing its end.

Recently came news of the fiscal meltdown's impact on major cultural institutions. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame has announced the closing of its New York City branch, which had been open only a year. And closer to home, the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem revealed last week that a plummeting endowment had forced it to lay off 16 staffers.

Thus the word that the Salem Theatre Company will soon have a venue of its own is certainly worthy of celebration.

About to enter its ninth season, the STC has developed a strong local following. Yet its programming was hampered by the lack of a permanent home for its productions.

Last week, STC officials announced plans to move into a former storefront at 90 Lafayette St. in Salem near where the historic downtown meets the city's growing waterfront district.

City leaders were quick to hail the announcement.

"Having an active and exceptional theater like STC in our downtown will only add to its vibrancy and success," Mayor Kim Driscoll declared.

Indeed, STC executive director Gary LaParl says that besides its own productions, the company plans to present educational programming, speaker and artist series, staged readings and musical performances that will keep it open "nearly every weekend of the year."

While the organization is in full fundraising mode, the relatively small scale of the effort makes the project entirely feasible.

Marblehead architect Bruce Greenwald, with input from STC artistic director John Fogle and sound and lighting designer Ryan Robbins, has already drawn plans for the exterior and interior of the facility, which will include a 180-square-foot stage, seating for 60 people, backstage space and a box office and lobby out front.

Plans are to have the space ready for the STC's February production of "Loot," and host parts of the Salem Film Festival in March.

For area theater fans, the holidays haven't been quite as bright without the opportunity to see the North Shore Music Theatre's production of "A Christmas Carol," now being performed in Portsmouth, N.H. It should be noted, however, that STC is offering not one, but two, holiday productions of its own ("A Child's Christmas in Wales" and the adults-only "The Eight: Reindeer Monologues"), albeit in still temporary quarters at the Salem Athenaeum.

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