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THEATER NOTES

Costly 'Selena' Teaches a Useful Lesson

By DON SHIRLEY

With the musical "Selena" losing more than \$1 million in its spring and summer run at the Doolittle Theatre, the Ricardo Montalban Nosotros Foundation, which operates the theater, has learned a lot, said Jerry Velasco, chairman of the foundation's executive board and president of Nosotros, the community organization allied with the foundation.

Although the foundation didn't lose money--all the risk was assumed by the producers--"we've learned that it's not easy and it's very expensive to run a big theater," Velasco said. "People ask us why we don't produce there ourselves. If we produce now, we'll go under."

Nosotros' previous theatrical productions were done in a 66-seat theater, as opposed to the 1,200-seat Doolittle. No union contracts were required in the little theater, and Velasco said his organization must meet with the unions to define exactly which productions at the Doolittle will require contracts and which will be considered "community productions" that don't require such contracts. "I think they'll work with us," Velasco said.

A number of projects that would improve the theater's physical plant were discovered during the "Selena" run, Velasco said. The foundation hopes to attend to these matters early next year, following the theater's only set theatrical booking, "Paquito's Christmas," Dec. 12-22.

The foundation still plans to rename the theater after Montalban, but not until the improvements are made.

Velasco hopes some of the shows that might have played at the Shubert Theatre will consider the Doolittle, now that the proposed demolition of the Shubert has been announced. The Doolittle is barely more than half the size of the Shubert, but some productions may prefer a smaller venue, Velasco hopes. **SHOW ME THE MONEY:** Until now, Theatre LA has provided support services, advocacy and awards to member theaters and producers, currently numbering 190. But here comes a new benefit for a few of its constituents: cash.

Theatre LA is taking a first baby step toward becoming a grant-awarding organization. It's joining forces with the L.A.-based National Repertory Theatre Foundation, which holds a playwriting competition each year. Any of Theatre LA's member companies can apply to produce a staged reading of one of the five finalists' plays in the National Repertory Theatre Foundation competition. The five successful applicants will receive \$1,000 each for producing the readings, scheduled for early November.

The money need not pay the expenses of producing the readings. At least some of it could go to general

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organizational support, Theatre LA President Lee Wochner said.

However, each applicant will be asked how it would disperse the money, and Wochner added that unless the organizational needs are dire, "we'd like to see the people in the readings get some sort of stipend."

The participating companies will be chosen by a panel of three: a Theatre LA board member, a National Repertory board member and another "well-respected member of the theater scene," Wochner said. None of the judges will be affiliated with any of the companies that apply.

Wochner hopes the partnership is "a way to get our feet wet as a granting agency."

He cites a similar agency that serves off-Broadway, Alliance of Resident Theatres/New York, as a model; it has given out more than \$475,000 in grants and more than \$1.7 million in loans. Theatre LA doesn't have those resources, but the National Repertory Theatre Foundation, which is funded by private donors, will provide the \$5,000 in grants this year.

The playwriting competition originated 20 years ago and awards \$5,000 to the winning playwright, who will receive the award at this year's Theatre LA-sponsored Ovation Awards ceremony, scheduled for Nov. 12.

SAVE THE SHUBERT? Los Angeles Conservancy's Ken Bernstein said last week that his group, which has rallied around the cause of preserving a number of older theaters, has not given much thought to the fate of the Shubert. Because it was erected in 1972, it "may not have reached historical significance yet," he said. However, he added that the group will listen to its members, and "if many of them make a good case for it, we may take a second look." *

Don Shirley Is The Times' Theater Writer

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