

Big rent hikes at Royal Theatre leave arts groups scrambling

Victoria Symphony will move almost half of its concerts to UVic auditorium

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Royal Theatre rent rates for local non-profits will double next year, a decision that has arts groups reeling and one, the Victoria Symphony, changing locations.

Photograph By BRUCE STOTESBURY, TIMES COLONIST

The cost of renting the Royal Theatre will double next year for local non-profits, a decision that has arts groups reeling and one, the Victoria Symphony, changing locations for some concerts.

Three longtime users — Victoria Symphony, Dance Victoria and Pacific Opera Victoria — say the Royal and McPherson Theatres Society, which runs the theatre, made the change with little consultation.

“We three generate 75 per cent of the Royal Theatre’s revenue,” said symphony CEO Kathryn Laurin, whose organization will move almost half its 2019-2020 concerts to UVic’s Farquhar Auditorium.

As much as next September’s rate increase hurts, so do new booking restrictions, including the loss of a requirement that RMTS book around the symphony and Pacific Opera’s annual dates.

RMTS argues its own financial squeeze forced the move. “Our public funding has been frozen for 20 years,” said spokesman Randy Joynt.

“Our operating support from the municipalities that fund the Royal Theatre has been the same since 1998. Something had to change.” The civic-owned venue operates with an annual \$100,000 grant from Oak Bay, Saanich and Victoria municipalities. Raising rates and freeing up dates for higher-paying customers would ease the stress.

The Royal Theatre also needs to offer more variation in programming, Joynt said. “As the capital region’s population grows and the demographics change, there’s an obligation to make the theatre more accessible to a range of presenters and the audiences they serve.”

Stephen White, executive producer of Dance Victoria, said conversations with RMTS “became less about rental increases and more about the Royal Theatre having access to dates between September and May.” Those conversations were limited, according to the Victoria Symphony: The rental increase was put in place after just two meetings between RMTS and the non-profits.

The symphony has been told its rent, currently \$1,850 per day, will go to \$2,500 Sunday to Wednesday, \$3,500 on Thursdays and \$4,000 on Friday or Saturday. Those rates now apply to rehearsal days — currently \$800 — too.

Joynt said that is still “a substantially reduced rate” compared with what commercial organizations will pay.

Under the new rental agreement, local non-profit organizations would no longer be permitted to rent the theatres between Dec. 15 and Jan. 1. Among the groups affected by the decision are Kaleidoscope Theatre, Victoria Jazz Society, Ballet Victoria and Victoria Operatic Society.

RMTS also notified non-profit tenants it will hold one prime weekend a month from September to May, to make room for commercial productions.

According to RMTS’s annual report, local non-profits rented the Royal Theatre for 187 days in 2017. Between 2013 and 2017, non-profits accounted for 90 per cent of days the theatre was used.

“Currently, three organizations occupy 91 per cent of the weekend dates in the theatre season between September and May,” Joynt said.

“That means there is no room for many other types of entertainment that would like to be at the Royal Theatre.”

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