

At arts venues, devoted spenders taking spotlight

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For years, cultural institutions have strived to shed their image as pricey and elitist. Nearly all offer some form of a "rush" student ticket with savings of 50 percent or more on the day of a show. Many host special performances, from readings to rehearsals, without the standard hefty admission. Florida Stage once even tried a pay-what-you-want night aimed at welcoming newcomers to the acclaimed theater.

But by nearly all measures, such promotions have not been that popular in luring younger patrons and fresh faces. It's still the same audience: deep-pocketed, arts-loving retirees from the Northeast raised on a steady diet of classical music, dance, visual arts and theater.

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bluntly: "I don't think price is a barrier to many people."

True, ticket prices are higher. But the new way of marketing the arts is to focus on the dedicated few as opposed to the uninterested whole. Why offer discounts when the real demand increasingly these days is for more exclusive, pricier products?

Bonita Kolb, a Pennsylvania-based academic who has devoted a large part of her career to studying the business of the arts, puts it this way: "The people who grabbed up the low-priced tickets were going to go anyway."

Hints of this new thinking are starting to play out locally.

While Kravis still offers \$15 balcony seats for more than a dozen of its presentations this season, it's also finding huge success with a premium ticket program introduced a few years ago, in which patrons pay a surcharge for a prime seat plus a champagne reception. The center offers 250 such seats for selected programs. It brings the cost to as much as



\$140 a ticket, but it hasn't resulted in any complaints. If anything, the hall finds interest is so strong that it never has enough of the seats to sell.

The Palm Beach Opera is also testing a new approach this season. It's boosting prices by as much as \$10 for its two most popular operas, *Turandot* and *La Traviata*. The concept echoes what sports franchises have done in recent years, charging more when the visiting team is, say, the perennially popular New York Yankees rather than the all-but-ignored Florida Marlins.

But that means a top ticket to the opera is now \$175 (and that's not including the suggested contribution the company seeks from patrons who want those primo seats). Still, the company says selling high-priced tickets is never an issue. It's the \$23 ones that represent the challenge.

High-priced tickets "become a status symbol," explains opera Marketing Director Alexandra Kushner Wasil. "You're sitting in an area where it's pretty well known you're a donor of a certain level with the opera."

To be sure, there are still cultural patrons who appreciate a bargain. And the most cash-strapped ones - think seniors on fixed incomes - resent having to pay more.

"The only seat I could afford was in the last row, so I stopped going," says Palm Beach Gardens retiree Lee Wolf, speaking in particular of the Kravis' programming.

Tickets haven't been getting any cheaper. A survey of prominent local arts groups finds that prices have climbed steadily within the past decade - in some cases, outpacing the rate of inflation, which has run 30 percent over that 10-year stretch. That \$175 top opera ticket represents a 40 percent increase from the \$125 the company charged for the same seat in 1997-98.

Even groups that have hiked their prices a relatively modest amount still fall into the outpacing-inflation category. The Norton Museum of Art has raised its standard admission price from \$5 to \$8 since 1997 - a mere three bucks but a 60 percent spike nonetheless.

To be sure, local arts groups aren't boosting prices to make an easy profit. Just the opposite. Executives point out repeatedly that ticket sales cover only a percentage of their budgets - the range is roughly 25 percent to 50 percent - with contributions from donors small and large, individual and corporate, making up most of the difference.

"The fact is a visitor pays only a fraction of the actual cost," Flagler Museum Executive Director John Blades says.

Those costs aren't decreasing. Today, arts groups are shelling out considerably more for everything from insurance to artist fees. And that's not factoring in the expansion projects or improvements that many have undertaken. The Norton, for example, has undergone a \$65 million expansion over the past decade. The bottom line: Patrons are getting a lot more art for their additional \$3.

More important, however, may be the fact that the devoted patron, especially the devoted younger patron, doesn't mind paying more.

"If there's a show we want to see, we'll see it," says twentysomething West Palm Beach publicist Alyson Seligman, who regularly heads to the Kravis for Broadway and comedy shows.

And what about the younger or even Baby Boomer-age patron who doesn't attend? Cultural observers say it's hard to blame it all on price when that same audience seems to have no difficulty spending its discretionary income on everything from \$100 sneakers to \$50,000 luxury cars. And that's not mentioning the cost of popular entertainment: It isn't as if rock bands have difficulty selling out shows where ticket prices are well into the three-digit range.

But rock 'n' roll is a for-profit enterprise. By contrast, the performing and visual arts generally fall under the more socially conscious nonprofit realm. Doesn't that mean paying heed to the broadest possible public?

"We want to make sure we're accessible," Ballet Florida Executive Director Ken Okel says.

But what if being accessible also means not being able to pay the light bill? For some perennially cash-strapped arts groups, the real danger may be underpricing.

Ballet Florida, which has had well-documented financial troubles in recent years, could be a case in point. It has raised the top ticket price for its immensely popular holiday production of *The Nutcracker* only 20 percent in the past decade, from \$50 to \$60. That may be too good a deal, says Patricia Martin, author of the newly published *RenGen (Renaissance Generation): The Rise of the Cultural Consumer - and What It Means to Your Business*.

"With things like *The Nutcracker*, people will pay any price," Martin says.

Martin also makes the point that if groups still feel lower prices are a valuable draw, especially in welcoming younger patrons, they need to create affordable, audience-friendly events rather than discounting their more traditional formal product.

She notes the example of Seattle's Pacific Northwest Ballet, which has a "\$5 Fridays" promotion in which patrons can attend an hourlong studio rehearsal.

Another approach that's being embraced locally is offering mini-subscriptions. It's no secret that the new generation of audiences is loath to commit itself to a full season of shows. So groups like Florida Stage are letting them get their feet wet - and save some money - by selling subscriptions to as few as three shows. Florida Stage officials say their program has been quite successful.

A lot more successful, in fact, than the pay-what-you-want promotion. The theater scrapped that idea years ago.

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