



Cash crunch takes a toll on Detroit cultural scene

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If the Detroit cultural scene is looking for a theme song for 2008, it might try an old blues line by Herbie Hancock called "Empty Pockets."

No force had as big an impact on local arts institutions and audiences this year as Michigan's lifeless economy, which has led to a flood of red ink, cutbacks and conditions that cultural leaders say are the most challenging they've ever seen.

Deficits are up, corporate and individual donations are down, ticket sales are weak and angst is racing through the corridors of culture like a particularly virulent infection. The irony is that so many of the same institutions are on the brink of new eras of artistic achievement -- if the economy, which is expected to get worse before it gets better, doesn't sabotage them first.

The Detroit Institute of Arts, for example, ran a \$17-million operating shortfall in 2008 that it plugged with money from its ongoing special fund-raising campaign. Museum leaders sliced \$1 million from this year's budget and are considering layoffs and cuts in artistic programs in early 2009 to further address the structural deficit in the DIA's budget, which threatens its status as a top-tier museum.

At the same time, the DIA, flush with a newly renovated \$158-million building and an innovative, user-friendly reinstallation, saw attendance soar by 45% and its profile rise to its greatest heights in a generation.

A similar dichotomy ran through the rest of the scene:

--The Detroit Symphony Orchestra lost just more than \$500,000 in 2008, though the deficit would have been far greater if not for \$2 million in last-minute emergency funding from some of the orchestra's most reliable donors. The good news at Orchestra Hall is that Leonard Slatkin -- a widely traveled 64-year-old American maestro with the potential to elevate the DSO's international stature while weaving the orchestra deeper into the fabric of metro Detroit -- made his long-awaited formal debut as music director earlier this month.

--At the Detroit Opera House, Michigan Opera Theatre dealt with a projected deficit of up to \$800,000 by canceling its production of "I Pagliacci" scheduled for the spring -- the first such jettisoning in MOT history -- and eliminating three jobs. Musically, however, the company had a strong year, highlighted by an unexpectedly alluring production of Puccini's "La Rondine" and a

revival of the Richard Danielpour-Toni Morrison opera "Margaret Garner" that was even more satisfying than MOT's world premiere of the work in 2005.

--At Music Hall, company leaders temporarily furloughed 41% of the full-time staff and some part-time workers for four to six weeks during the summer to ensure a balanced budget and keep the theater in good stead for a refinancing of its mortgage, an action they said was crucial to a secure future. The moves came as Music Hall made progress in transforming itself from a rental facility into a more robust arts presenter.

Despite the doom and gloom, there were two financial victories worth noting, one small and one large. The grant budget for the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs increased 2.6% to \$7.9 million, a slight uptick that still leaves funding near its lowest level in decades. Meanwhile, the Troy-based Kresge Foundation continued to dole out the \$8.8 million it committed last year to cultural groups and individual artists in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties.

Earlier this month Kresge awarded its first annual Eminent Artist Award to Charles McGee, the 84-year-old Detroit painter and sculptor. The raw beauty of his work and his continuing vitality - McGee still makes art at home or in his studio everyday -- seems an ideal metaphor for culture in Detroit during these perilous times.

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