

Theatre Orangeville jumps back into gear with municipal help

By Joshua Drakes

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A loan approved by the Town of Orangeville represents a bridge to financial stability for Theatre Orangeville rather than a bailout.

The municipality will front the theatre company \$200,000 over five years, with five per cent interest, and another \$100,000 shorter-term loan to cover interest accumulated from debt.

Many professional theatre companies across Canada have faced such hardship from COVID-19 pandemic-era.

Artistic Director Jennifer Stewart said the theatre has been battling financial challenges that were driven by years of rising operating costs, inflation, and reduced revenues following COVID-19 social shutdowns, leaving a widening gap between expenses and income.

‘There was a widening gap over the last three or four years that has been difficult for Theatre Orangeville and theatres all over the country,’ she said. ‘That’s where we were at, and we had this deficit, trying to pay it off, but we couldn’t, but we wanted to keep the doors open.’

Because Theatre Orangeville operates strictly as a not-for-profit professional theatre company, the pandemic was particularly harsh, with no large fund from years of profits to rely upon. Stewart said that this is by design, to keep prices down and to keep the theatre eligible for grants, so the quality is not impacted, either.

‘The goal is to be at zero,’ she said. ‘If you have too much money in your savings, then you don’t get access to the arts council grants. It’s that fine balance of knowing how much you need to spend, and then spending it.’

‘Take Mirvish, for example, a for-profit theatre company. The decisions they make are because they need to make money where we’re not-for-profit, which is easier from our standpoint because it takes that pressure off of us. We can create things and try things and bring new things to this community that haven’t been done anywhere else.’

The COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying social shutdowns destabilized that balance and changed that strategy.

After exhausting all its other options, the organization determined municipal assistance was the only remaining option. It was a tough moment and cast a shadow of uncertainty over the team behind Theatre Orangeville.

‘We asked for extra sponsorships, donors, but everyone’s feeling the crunch and the pinch of increasing costs, and so there just wasn’t that much available,’ Stewart said. ‘This was sort of a last resort.’

Stewart emphasized the loan was only approved after the organization presented the Town with a balanced operating plan for the 2026-27 season and demonstrated its ability to repay the funds.

‘We had to prepare,’ she said. ‘We had to show the town that we were fiscally responsible moving forward with the new operating budget for the 26-27 season, and we had to prove to them that we’d be able to have the funds, the revenue to pay it back. We didn’t know if the loan was going to go through.’

Laura Austin, Chairperson of Theatre Orangeville’s Board of Directors, said that prior to the meeting, the theatre had already made significant reductions in spending to pay off outstanding expenses, proving their reliability to repay a loan granted to them.

“Over the last six months, we have demonstrated that reliability, as we’ve paid off \$150,000,” she said. “We met with every department. We really went through a cost containment over the last six months. Where can we make cuts? What is absolutely not necessary right now moving forward because we need to pay off our debt so that we can keep the doors open.

“I think that’s what convinced the CFO and CAO that we were capable and that we were righting the ship.”

The presentation to Council reached the right points, as it was supported unanimously.

Rather than viewing the loan as an investment in a single organization, theatre representatives argue it is an investment in a community asset that reaches well beyond the stage.

In addition to producing professional theatre, Theatre Orangeville operates youth camps, educational programming, after-school initiatives, concerts, film screenings and partnerships with local organizations.

Austin described the theatre as a creative outlet for children, seniors and adults alike, providing opportunities not only for performers, but also for those interested in technical theatre, production, carpentry, lighting and sound.

“We fill in the gaps where some kids aren’t athletic and play lacrosse and hockey, for example,” she said. “We have after school programs, and then there’s all different kinds of roles in theatre. You could be into lighting or sound, or we’ve had a lot of interns come through for the production side. They’re building sets and doing carpentry or scene painting. There’s a wide variety of different skills you can build here.”

The theatre also pointed to its economic impact, saying productions draw visitors into Orangeville’s downtown where audiences often dine, shop and support local businesses before or after performances.

Austin said the venue provides professional-calibre productions comparable to those found in larger urban centres while encouraging residents and visitors to experience Orangeville’s restaurants and retail sector.

“We support the Blues and Jazz Festival, we just did Nashville Takeover, we have the Dufferin Film Festival,” she said. “There’s also the Orangeville Musical Theatre—and while they’re a volunteer-run amateur theatre, they have access to a professional stage, professional lighting, and professional sound. It’s wonderful that we can support that? Alton Public School? they use our ticketing? so Theatre Orangeville really facilitates programming in the community, which I think is a great service not every town is fortunate enough to have.”

Officials stressed that the theatre’s success depends on continued community support rather than additional public funding.

They said the most effective way residents can help is by purchasing tickets, enrolling children in camps and participating in programs already being offered. Revenue generated through attendance allows the theatre to reduce debt while maintaining affordable programming and continuing to develop new Canadian productions and community partnerships.

Looking ahead, Stewart said that Theatre Orangeville plans to strengthen its financial position through touring productions, co-productions with other theatres and expanded subscription options. The expanded options include the new Flex Subscription, which allows patrons to commit to the five-show or three-show mainstage packages and then reserve their seats for the performances that best fit their schedules.

The new touring plans are at the center of Stewart’s vision for the future.

“I really want to take Theatre Orangeville shows on the road,” she said. “We want to do tours. We are applying for touring grants right now from the OAC and the Canada Council, because there’s a lot of opportunities to do co-productions with similar-sized

theatres as ours. If we can do co-productions, it shares the initial cost, and the actors have more work, and we reach a greater audience.?

Theatre Orangeville said that their goal is to repay the loan in full, while continuing to rebuild public awareness of the role the organization plays in Orangeville's cultural and economic life.

They will also be working to restore confidence in the organization and ensure the theatre remains a lasting community resource for years to come.