

Lied Center no bargain; merits are myths

I take exception to Timothy Geisert's guest opinion (Daily Nebraskan, Nov. 13). The Lied Center for the Performing Arts is not a bargain now, and time will prove it to be an onerous problem for this city, this state, and the University of Nebraska.

Guest opinion

Lincoln has a population of 180,000, 99 percent of whom do not support the arts now. We have no ballet company, no opera company, and it is purely wishful thinking to suppose that either of the local orchestras—as good as they are—would have any desire to perform in a 2,500-seat auditorium; they virtually never have a sold-out house in the substantially smaller halls in which they currently play.

Also, the theater department of UNL has no intention of using the Lied Center for performances. A theater performance in such a large auditorium is simply not feasible for them. To say nothing of the empty seats that would exist in the house, to produce just one set for a play in the Lied Center would eat up the department's entire budget for sets for a year.

As for the UNL School of Music, the Lied Center no doubt will see little use from this group. The 800-seat Kimball Recital Hall is perfectly adequate for the School of Music's larger group needs, and even that hall is too large for a performer to face an audience of 50 people in an 800-seat hall; the 50 people notwithstanding, the size of the auditorium makes it look like an empty house. It is of course possible that students could stage their operas more conveniently in the Lied Center, but these performances never sell out Kimball Hall now; it seems highly unlikely they would be able to sell out a 2,500-seat house for even one performance. Again, the cost of building a set for the large stage would be prohibitive.

Geisert says the Lied Center will let us stage "for the first time in this area major musical events and national touring companies." It seems to me Ron Bowlin, the Kimball Performing Artists Series has been doing just exactly that for years — not just major musical events and national touring companies, but some of the best music and arts programs nationally and indeed internationally. Nevertheless, it is a rare night when the 800-seat Kimball Hall is sold out for one of these performances. This fact alone is a testament to how well the people of Lincoln and surrounding areas support the arts. It is only due to Bowlin's astute budgeting, good judgment in booking and inexpensive stage crew costs that this series survives to the extent that it does.

Omaha to Lincoln?

In addition to the Kimball series, there are other excellent programs available now in Lincoln — Friends of Chamber Music, Abendmusik, among others — that consistently bring in some of the best music available nationally and internationally, none of which could begin to support the Lied Center.

It would be heartening to believe that those organizations in Omaha would come to Lincoln to perform in the Lied Center, but that will not be the case either, unless the climate here changes drastically. The Omaha Symphony has been told in no uncertain terms in the past that the parochial patrons and mavens of culture in Lincoln do not want them to perform here. Nor does the Omaha Ballet, Opera/Omaha or Theatre Caravan of Omaha seem to be welcome. Thus, the talk of getting a crossover audience—or crossover performers—from Omaha is simply a pipe dream, and may well be a smoke screen.

Maintenance costs for the Lied Center promise to be high—as they are for all such facilities around the country. The Lied Center is going to be a drain on the pocketbooks of a relatively poor state.

Compounding that problem is the fact that

future donors to the University of Nebraska and NU Foundation are going to be asked to chip in to this new and attractive money-eater, simply to keep up with maintenance costs—at the expense of other ongoing and more needy programs at the university.

Consider the relative merits of a money-eating, half-empty \$25-million-plus performing arts center compared with a UNL department head who has to use his own money to bring in applicants for a tenured professorship opening because his department doesn't have enough money to pay the applicants' travel costs. Think about the few outstate Nebraskans who will use and gain benefit from the Lied Center, and then think about the large numbers of outstate students attending UNL who could benefit from excellent instructors—if we could afford to pay good professors enough to keep them here.

Top priorities

The truth is that until we have a well-educated populace, we're never going to have enough arts supporters to keep the Lied Center going, anyway. The university, NU Foundation and the Legislature should make education — not some pie-in-the-sky, pompous idea of creating in the Lied Center the cultural navel of Nebraska—their top priority.

I am an ardent supporter of the arts in all forms. I attend events regularly at Kimball; I go to the theater productions at Howell and the Studio Theatre; I visit Sheldon, donate to it and go to its movies; I support Abendmusik, the Lincoln Symphony, and the Nebraska Chamber Orchestra, among other things. I would be the first to support the Lied Center if there were any substance to the boosterism surrounding its planning and construction. The proliferation of the arts is very important to me; the more, the better, I believe. And I support excellence at UNL. Yet, the Lied Center is antithetical to excellence at UNL. There were and are better places for our tax dollars as well as the founda-

tion's best efforts. Varner's Mausoleum

The crux of the situation comes down to D.B. Varner, chairman of the NU Foundation. Varner is the best fund-raiser this university has ever seen. His ability to find sources of money and channel them into the university is profound. But was Varner thinking of the university—this strapped institution gradually declining in excellence—when he provisionally accepted the \$10 million the Lied estate's executrix offered? A gift is not a gift—nor is it a bargain—when there are strings attached like the ones attached to this money. One can only speculate whether Varner would have been able to sway that woman to offer the money with no strings; he surely knew and knows the university could use that money in other ways and he certainly is a most persuasive man. Would Varner even have had the inclination to do so? We shall probably never know.

But we should question his judgment and motives and those of the regents—with the exception of Robert Simmons, who has to his credit his refusal to give in to the good-old-boy cronyism of the others—and those of the Legislature in giving approval to this enormously burdensome plan. Indeed, the Legislature is playing hands-off and refusing to cross Varner. They will allocate \$5 million in tax dollars (while cutting the university's budget by \$3.4 million). No doubt that \$5 million could have been used much more effectively elsewhere—whether by the university or by another agency; there's a crying need in plenty of areas.

Meanwhile, there will be a continuing need for money to keep the Lied Center operative. And Varner will get a real monument to his fund raising abilities. It's unfortunate, but little wonder the Lied Center is being called Varner's Mausoleum around town.

Diane K. Wanek
University of Nebraska Press

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