

PROF. JIM CULLEY'S 2005 GRANT PROPOSAL OUTLINING ACOUSTICAL PROBLEMS WITH THE UNIVERSITY THEATRE

As Technical Director of the Department of TV, Radio, Film and Theatre, I recently had an experience in the University Theatre that disturbed me greatly. In connection with the CLA and MOSAIC Cross Cultural Center, our theatre hosted a performance of a Muslim-American play on September 11. Many of the Pakistani American actors had accents; audience members who saw the play assumed that that was why they had had trouble hearing it.

However, a professor in our department, who had seen the *same cast* perform the *same text* at the Berkeley Repertory Theater only a few weeks earlier, told me that at BRT he had been able to understand 95% of the words spoken by the actors, while at SJSU he had been able to make out only about 45%. His experience amounted to virtually a controlled experiment demonstrating the faulty acoustics of the University Theatre, but it was not the first time we've had complaints about hearing in the venue. Our alumnus Ed Mosher has for years shepherded groups of alumni to our productions, and for years reported that they have trouble hearing.

Complaints have increased over time. The facility was designed in the early 1950's and built in '53-54. The design was for the spoken word/drama and programming today is far different, not to mention audience expectations.

Before the problem with the acoustical environment in the UT can be addressed, it must be scientifically identified and quantified. Step one would be to have a qualified acoustician study the existing situation. There is a lot of HVAC, scene shop, external traffic and interior space noise that needs definition as to level of intrusion into the audience environment. Reflection, absorption and reverberation have never, to the best of our knowledge, been measured. Wall, floor and ceiling surfaces are from the early '50's and have never been altered. Fixing this problem will be, to some degree expensive. Before we can begin to raise money to fix it, we must demonstrate that it exists and prove its dimensions. A full-blown study of the problem might cost around \$25,000. However, for \$2,000, an initial study, could be done by Dennis Paoletti, a Principal of Shen Milsom & Wilke, Inc., a firm internationally recognized in acoustics; they have done work for The Getty Center in Los Angeles, the Geary Theater Renovation in San Francisco, and coincidentally, the Berkeley Repertory Theater. Paoletti has, in the past, taught a course in acoustics to interior design students at SJSU. His initial study would enable us to begin raising money to address the problem, through grant-writing or solicitation of alumni contributions.

Tackling the acoustical problems of the UT is a daunting prospect because of the expense that will likely be involved. However, located next to the new library and a block south of the new City Hall, the University Theatre is an important part of the University's public face. Furthermore, our student actors deserve a space where their voices can be heard. But most of all, we're trying desperately to teach a campus full of students, most of whom tell us they have never once in their lives seen a play, that theatre-going is one of the great and essential pleasures of being a literate, civilized citizen of the world. When their first experience of theatre is marred by incomprehensible sound, I fear we may accomplish the opposite.