

COLUMN: Front row centre perspective

Brampton Guardian

It's costing taxpayers \$250,000 to support summer theatre in Brampton in 2014.

That will pay for three shows in the (roughly) 100-seat Studio Theatre, one show in the 870-seat Main Stage theatre, and two runs of Shakespeare in the Square presented on the Garden Square stage.

That's roughly just over \$41,000 for each of the six productions. That sum pays for rights and royalties, marketing, artistic and technical staff. It pays for props, costumes, set designers and choreographers. And, there's more.

Sure, it seems like a lot of money – but it's not. And yes, I realize that patrons still pay for tickets (except for Shakespeare), but the cost is greatly reduced when compared to Toronto, Niagara, Stratford or any other large city producing professional summer theatre.

So when you consider the city's 2014 operating budget is a cool \$530 million, the price tag for a season of summer theatre seems like a drop in the bucket.

And, this year's budget is a 36 per cent decrease from last year's \$392,000 to produce a summer season.

A cut that deep raises many questions though – questions about the future of summer theatre, and whether taxpayers should continue to fund it.

But this isn't a new debate. According to the Review of Theatre Operations by KPMG, released Sept. 27, 2013, there is a divisive attitude toward the city's theatres.

"Some see the theatres as an economic development creator and community service where the focus is not on the Theatre Division's bottom line, but the economic spin-offs.... Others understand the Theatres to be a business designed to operate on a profit-making (or at least break-even) basis."

Shortly after, Committee of Council rejected a profit-making model for the theatres. They want a model that positions the theatres as "major source of diverse entertainment, providing arts and culture services" to Brampton and beyond.

The Rose Theatre was never built to make money – but that doesn't mean it shouldn't.

But, I digress; I want to talk about the summer season, because if deeper cuts are coming to the Rose Theatre budget, I suspect summer theatre funding could be first on the chopping block.

I could be wrong. I hope I'm wrong.

Tonight, I will be attending my seventh season of the summer series. Yes, it's part of my job – and for that, I consider myself very fortunate. I've seen some unforgettable theatre (Twelve Angry Men, Broadway Gold, The Drawer Boy for instance) and then some theatre I've already forgotten.

But what I always notice is the reaction from other patrons – especially in Studio Two, and especially if it's their first time there. It's always positive, and comments are always in the vein of "Why didn't I do this sooner?"

Regular summer season patrons Jeff and Jeannette Williams share my enthusiasm. I asked them what they enjoy about the summer series.

"It's a very good theatre and a lovely little intimate space (in Studio Two)," said Jeannette.

Then I asked what their reaction would be if, hypothetically, funding for the program was cut altogether. They were appalled.

"We would be very upset," said Jeannette.

"The arts should have as much recognition as sports," Jeff started. "If that happened we'd vote to throw every member of council out of office."

I encourage you to see one show this season and get your own front row centre perspective on how tax dollars support summer theatre.

While you are there, keep in mind that 2014 tax dollars also pay for: \$119,000 for economic development staff to go to 13 countries; and up to \$200,000 for a forensic audit of council's expense spending, which in and of itself took around \$800,000 in taxpayer money over the last four years.