

ADVERTISING

Videos in Lobby Help Nonprofit Theaters Keep Actors on Stage

By PATRICIA WINTERS LAURO

THE world of nonprofit regional theater has been an uncluttered oasis in a commercial-laden world. But nothing lasts forever.

Seven major regional theaters around the country — from Seattle, Wash., to Providence, R.I. — have put video monitors in their lobbies to carry information and advertising. Movie theaters and some nonprofit theaters have long had TV monitors in their lobbies, but the new effort is part of a move to develop a national video network for advertisers.



Long Wharf Theater in New Haven, Conn., has a screen in its lobby for information & ads.

Called StageVision, the project is the work of the [National Corporate Theater Fund](#) in New York, which seeks financing for 19 leading nonprofit regional theaters. It is sponsored by [Sharp Electronics](#), which is supplying the Sharp Aquos liquid-crystal-display screens in the lobbies and is a StageVision advertiser; Time Inc., which is providing coverage of the arts from Time magazine and [time.com](#); and Palace Production Center, New York, which produces video from that information.

The project also has the support of the [National Endowment for the Arts](#), which provided a small but symbolic \$30,000 grant to develop it.

StageVision is the latest effort to tap into new ways to finance nonprofit theater, said Bruce Whitacre, executive director of the theater fund.

While philanthropy is still a crucial source of money, donations have flattened out over the years. Theater subscriptions — which supply guaranteed income — account for less than 50 percent of nonprofit theater audiences, he said. But marketing costs to reach potential subscribers continue to increase.

“Regional theater in the current climate is doing fairly well, but they are very thinly capitalized and dependent often on ticket sales,” Mr. Whitacre said. “The whole point is to expand beyond philanthropy to promotional marketing relationships.”

The theater fund began partnering with corporations about four years ago, including [Merrill Lynch](#), [Citigroup](#) Private Bank, Escada Fine Jewelry and Tournéau, he said. The partnerships typically did not include ads, but they permitted the companies to cultivate clients in various ways, like arranging for the Hispanic clients of Merrill Lynch to meet with the actress and dancer Chita Rivera after a performance.

StageVision is a new step toward commercialization, but Mr. Whitacre said those involved have been careful not to detract from the theatergoing experience.

The National Endowment said it approved the StageVision venture despite the advertising because the national programming was informative and of high quality. The first edition of StageVision is a video program on the

playwright [August Wilson](#), based on a profile by Time magazine. It discusses Mr. Wilson's life and work, which the endowment said would help people understand theater better.

Its use of video is especially appropriate for younger audiences, said Mario Garcia Durham, the endowment's director of presenting. He said a recent paper by the James Irvine Foundation advised nonprofit theaters to look at different ways to build audiences, especially younger ones. The audience for regional theater is roughly ages 35 to 65.

"We recognize that with younger people, the idea of a TV screen is probably something they would process, and it could help interest them in the genre," Mr. Durham said.

Ted Libbey, the endowment's director of media arts, said: "It also doesn't seem intrusive, despite the advertising and commercial component. There's a very strong editorial message that we think works."

StageVision allows companies to reach an important niche market: theater fund research shows that 52 percent of theatergoers earn more than \$75,000 a year and 82 percent have at least a college degree. That is the right market for Sharp, whose Aquos LC-TVs cost \$399 to \$15,999, said Neal Lattner, Sharp's senior director of marketing communications. And, he said, research shows that live theater audiences appreciate high-quality video and audio.

"We also know that by partnering with N.C.T.F., we are supporting a great nonprofit organization," he said, "supporting live theatrical productions that otherwise would not be produced."

The ads help promote the development of new plays because the nonprofits can afford to take artistic and financial risks that commercial theater cannot, said Bill O'Brien, the endowment's director of theater and musical theater.



Still, there is a potential for commercial abuse, endowment officials said. That, they said, is another reason they approved this endeavor.

"We would rather support an initiative we think could be used as a good model on how it should be done," Mr. Durham said. "Looking at the participants, they are all strong and artistically committed."

The first edition of StageVision discusses the life and work of the playwright August Wilson based on a profile by Time magazine.