

# Community theatre group is at risk of closing

By Stephanie Thiessen  
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

To many residents, the Milton Players Theatre Group is a local institution. Only the longest-time residents can remember when the group wasn't performing with passion and ability. But that might be about to change.

The volunteer-only group is currently experiencing such financial difficulties that, if something doesn't change soon, it might have to disband.

"While our attendance is going up — we've had strong ticket sales so far this year — if we don't start to pull in more money... we project that we will go under as early as the end of next year," said Players president Lynette Austin.

"It's a very harsh, cruel reality we're facing."

Rising costs for things like advertising and rehearsal space rental means the non-profit group isn't taking in enough money to continue. And its current fundraising, which includes putting on murder mysteries, isn't enough.

The financial issues are those being faced by a small town theatre group that's quickly turning into a large town theatre group, Austin said.

"It's a little disheartening, because you throw your heart and soul into every production," she said.

But all is not lost. Measures are being taken to fight for survival, and one such measure is stepped-up fundraising efforts. This includes the Spring Fling Dinner Dance being held at the Lions Club Hall, upstairs at Thompson Memorial Arena, April 8 from 7 p.m. to midnight.

Tickets cost \$40 each and include a chicken dinner followed by a performance by local comedian Jason Blanchard and a night of dancing.

Rounding out the event will be lip-synching, limbo and twist contests and door prizes.

"We're excited about the event. It's sure to be a lot of fun and we hope to see lots of people from the community out to enjoy the evening," Austin said.

The Spring Fling is the first of a series of fundraising activities.

The group will also be increasing ticket prices to its shows.

It hasn't yet been decided what the new cost will be, but the group is trying to keep the increase minimal, Austin said.

"When we raise the ticket prices, we hope our loyal audience will continue to stay loyal and understand why we've

increased our prices," Austin said.

For the past few years, show-only performances have cost \$15, while the dinner-theatres cost \$35 per person.

The Milton Players will also be applying to the Milton Community Fund and will be trying to get some corporate sponsorships, Austin said.

Because of the amount of work each show takes and the numerous fundraisers, one way the community can help is to become part of the group, either on stage or behind the scenes. Auditions notices appear in The Champion months before each show runs, but sometimes very few people turn out, she said.

Although most shows are sold out Friday and Saturday nights, it's usually only half-full Thursday nights. Austin's hoping the next show will consistently sell out. After all, there are still people in town who have never seen a show, she said. Residents may also want to help by making a cash donation to the group.

The Players started 27 years ago when a group of people interested in forming a local theatre group gathered together in response to an ad in The Champion. Several months later, those 14 people put on their first production.

Since then, they've performed in a number of locations, including their current one at the Milton Seniors' Activity Centre. Each year, the group stages three plays, with show-only productions and dinner theatres.

The dedication and commitment required of its members, which include actors and the behind-the-scenes crew, is staggering. One play requires almost 2,000 production hours.

Greg Nelson, president of Arts Milton, of which the Players is a member, said he's optimistic the group will pull through. "They've been around for over 25 years. That in itself is a testament to its resilience."

But the group needs to continue championing its cause to the public, he said.

"This (shows by the Players) is entertainment in its purest form. Here are people who simply want to show their craft and entertain at the same time," he said.

The Players' next show will be *Funny Money* by Ray Cooney, and will be presented May 5 to 7 and 11 to 13.

To purchase tickets for the Spring Fling Dinner Dance or for more information on the Players or how to help, call (905) 875-0629. More information can be found at [www.miltonplayers.com](http://www.miltonplayers.com).

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