

Weekender

# Entertainment



In its third year

## Markham Theatre making gains

By ALEX NEWMAN

In order to make live entertainment affordable, and thus more attractive for the average consumer, business sponsors have been appealed to.

In recent years, the arts have enjoyed the benefit of corporate tax laws that provide tax breaks for sponsoring the arts and many corporations seek a new public image by sponsoring cultural events. Take the Markham Theatre, for example. Without the Town of Markham, which constructed and operate the grand facility, and without the thriving business community which provides 14 per cent of the programming income, ticket prices might very well be out of reach for many audiences.

With a fully fledged professional operation—staff, programming, computerized ticket sales and reservations—the Markham Theatre's image is no less prestigious than that of Toronto's more renowned theatre centres.

Entering its third year of operation, the theatre is enjoying its greatest ticket sales ever. So far, 75 per cent are sold out.

### 20,000 seats sold

Based on the 1987-'88 season, ticket sales account for a phenomenal 85 per cent of the programming income, which sits at \$284,000. About 5,100 subscriptions have been sold for the various series offered this year. This translates to 20,000 seats.

Clearly, the theatre is doing well. The operating budget of \$415,000 is covered by concession sales of 18 per cent, rental of facilities and a tax base subsidy from the Town of Markham of 32 per cent.

This has not always been the case, however. Theatre Manager Marc Quinn said a lot of money was lost in the first year.

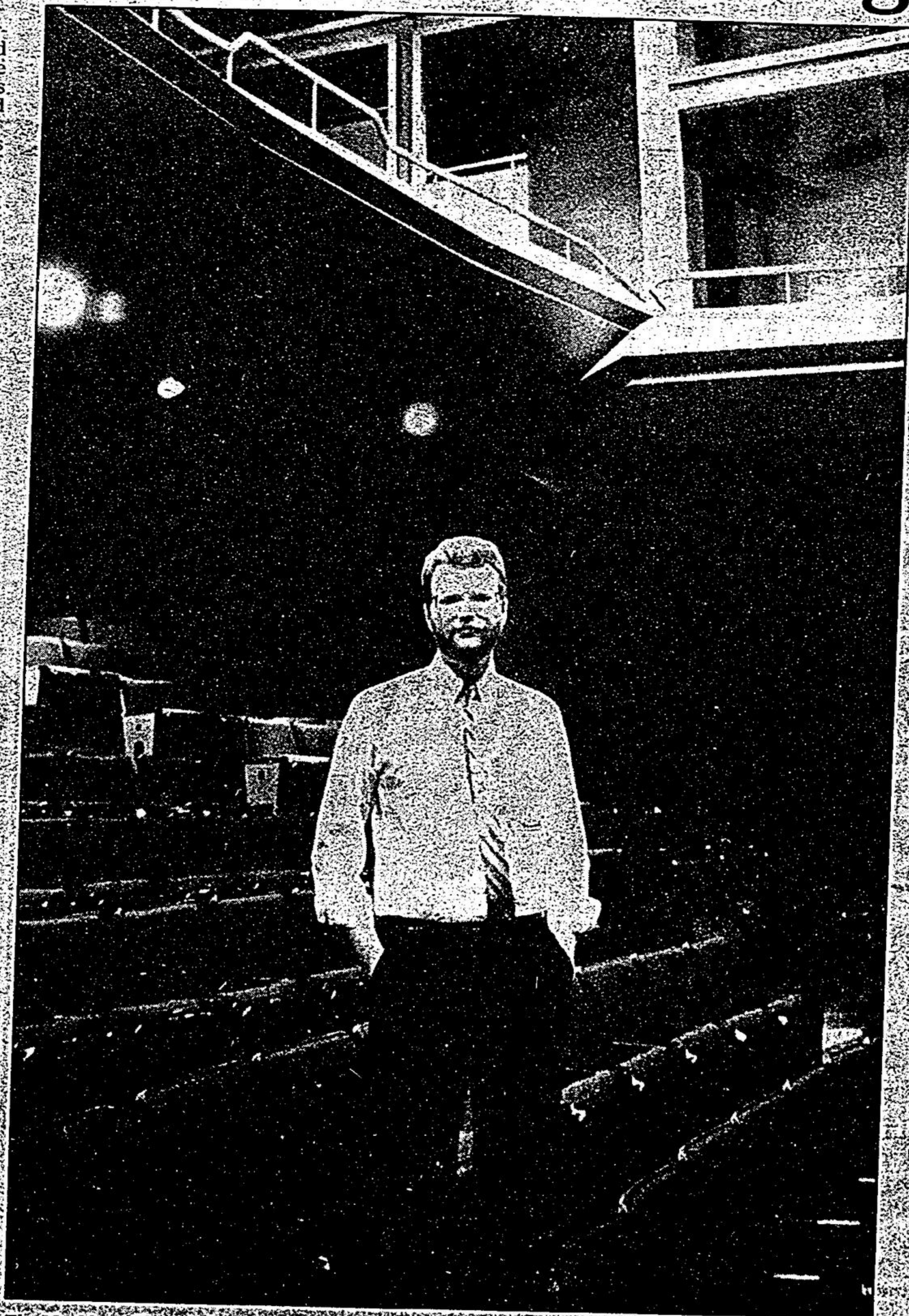
The Town first hired an experienced general manager, Cecil O'Neal, but Quinn thinks the theatre still had to take some baby steps to feel out the market. Quinn adds the drama portion of the program sold very well, but musical evenings such as Don Messer's Jubilee weren't great successes.

Presentation and advertising had some serious drawbacks that first year as well. Understated and subtle, the programs were too small. Printed on heavy vellum they were the size of ordinary invitations. The flyer possessed no grab appeal.

### Popular cross-section

Preparing for the second year, O'Neal tried a different kind of entertainment, moving more into theatre and selecting a more popular cross-section of musical performers, such as The Rovers, and an evening of Gershwin. A Family Series rounded out the list.

O'Neal had, mid-season, decided to return to school to complete a Masters, and to



The Markham Theatre doesn't see too many dark days according to manager Marc Quinn (above). Although it is a relatively small theatre, Mr. Quinn has been able to attract some big name

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### Poor reception

An interesting addition, The Tafelmusik Series, deserves some anecdotal attention. When the group approached Marc Quinn about using the theatre for their performances, Quinn had reservations

considering the poor reception of certain shows in the first year of the theatre's operation. He suggested that the group be included in the subscription series. His reasons, while appearing generous or altruistic, were in fact self-preservative. "I didn't want them encountering difficulties and then never returning to the Markham Theatre. We would lose a contract and for no good reason. That series has so far sold out 45 percent," he said.

Nor does the theatre rent out only to professionals. Born out of the efforts of smaller theatres like the Markham Little Theatre who were around long before Town

funds and corporate sponsorships, the large theatre space is frequently turned over to these community groups. Unionville High is one of the theatre's biggest users, says Quinn.

### Special matinees

According to one theatre teacher at the high school, Quinn often arranges special matinees of professional companies for the exclusive viewing of the Arts York programs, held at Unionville High. Many of the drama students there work within the theatre itself as part of a co-op program. All schools, though, have the option of using the theatre after arrangement and payment by the York Region Board of Education.

Corporate sponsorship has a snowballing effect. With a greater increase in programming, more attention is drawn to the theatre and in turn the smaller groups gain vital exposure.

Another advantage to the Markham Theatre, claims Quinn, is the good number of community groups who use the facility. "We're not dark very much of the time," he said wryly, "which of course justifies the existence of a theatre."

Markham Theatre is a community affair.

Several schools in the area have used the facility for commencement proceedings, plays, in the case of Unionville High which has no auditorium, the theatre is used for anything that requires a large space.

### Local audience

As for audiences, Quinn reports happily that "an overwhelming percentage of the audience comes from within Markham, including Thornhill, Milliken, Unionville."

When asked to compare the Markham facility to that of other regions, Quinn was reluctant to comment. "That's a difficult and loaded question. Every theatre is run differently. Some have no program budget to speak of, which means they rely solely on performing groups within the community, who often don't have the funds to generate more ticket sales. We have money set aside to organize a professional program, which makes a terrific difference."

Having the support from municipality and corporations, enable a theatre to schedule programs, not so much with that financial "bottom line" in mind, but with a view to enrich the cultural and artistic atmosphere and quality of the performances offered.

Has the theatre lived up to expectation? No, according to Marc Quinn, the facility has far exceeded expectations, at least on the professional side.

As for the community endeavours, which were already ongoing at the time of the theatre's construction, they have reported that over time their audiences have increased in numbers.

— Alex Newman