

Town Theatre complex dream a little closer

BY CONRAD BOYCE

Could it really be? Backers of a new performing arts venue in the Old Town Hall on Civic Avenue must have been pinching themselves Feb. 10 as they walked away from Town Council Chambers. Not only had they just heard and seen an exciting design concept from Roger Jones and Paul Sapounzi of the Ventin Group, but some members of Council were in the room and didn't protest at the numbers being tossed around.

For more details on the proposal, see page 7. You can also check out the full concept at the Town Offices or Public Library.

To summarize, though, we're looking at a state-of-the-art 300-seat proscenium theatre with a fully-loaded backstage area, including a 1,000-square-foot rehearsal hall and an even larger public reception hall.

The plan would utilize the present building for lobby space and the main seating area, while additions would be built on the east and south to accommodate the administration and backstage areas, as well as the stage itself.

The present building would essentially be gutted; all that would be utilized are the old walls and ceiling beams.

There are certainly ways the plan

could be trimmed. With the Latham Hall only a block away, for example, is the community space really needed? Or the office space that's provided (other downtown landlords might say they've got some space that's perfect for the purpose)? But considering the cost of institutional buildings these days, the four million dollar price tag for construction is pretty reasonable.

Mayor Sue Sherban, who has been a backer of the theatre plan for years, is confident that the capital cost is do-able, with the Town providing about a quarter of the total, and grants from senior government, and corporate or individual donations, covering the balance.

Where things get sticky, where they always do and where they often have in other communities with performing arts facilities, is in the annual operating cost of the place. Ventin Group's preliminary estimates are for an annual price tag of about \$250,000, with about \$80,000 coming back in rentals and other revenue such as bar sales. That means the Town would be subsidizing the theatre to the tune of about \$170,000 per year.

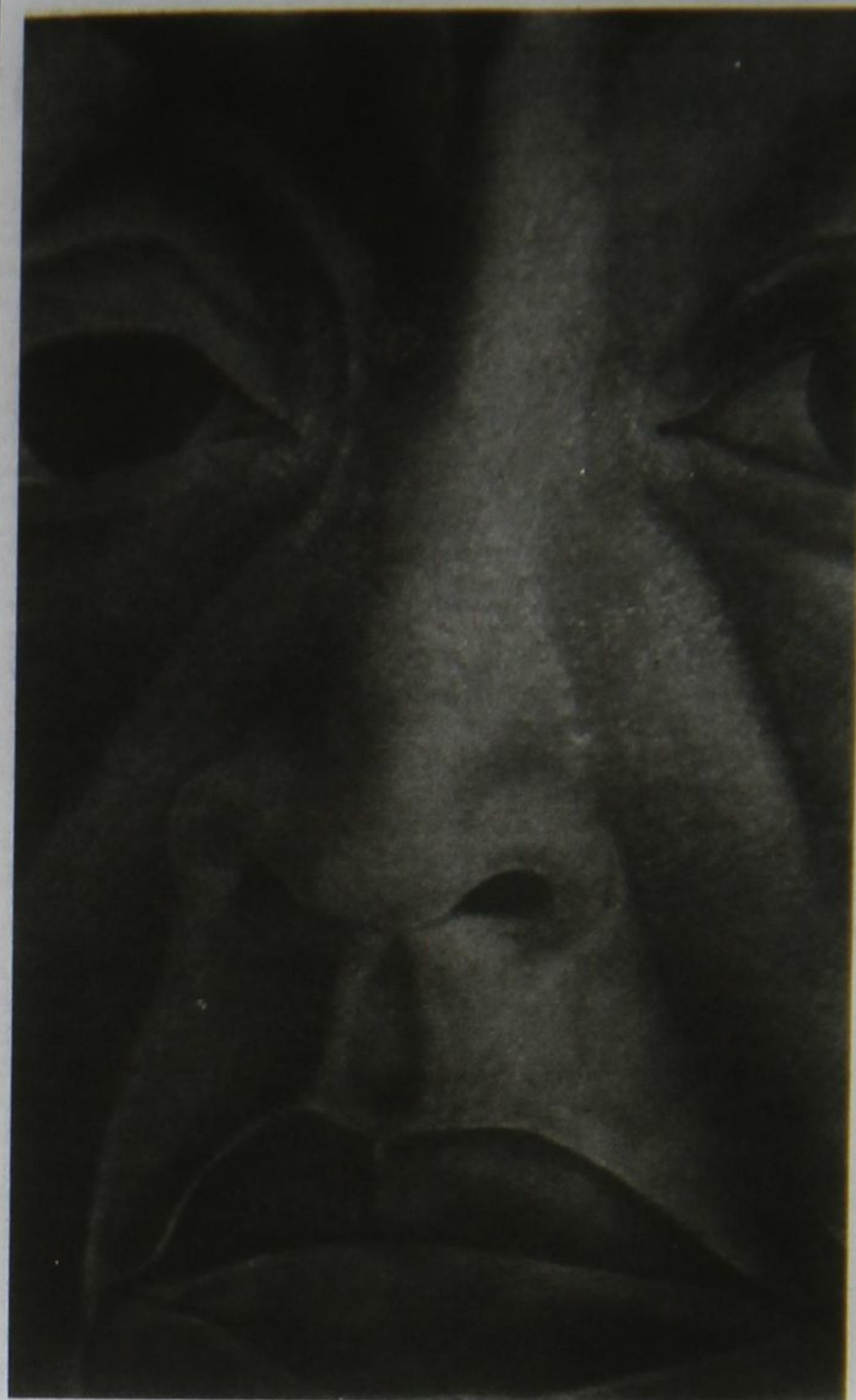
As Mr. Jones pointed out to the crowd, no community-owned theatre pays for itself. That may be true, but there's a long way between break-even and a \$170,000 hole.

Ventin's plan, for example, contemplates staff costs of about \$170,000 (the exact amount of the anticipated deficit!), including a full-time facility manager plus a full-time technical director.

Two communities fairly close to Stouffville (and about the same size), Uxbridge and Port Perry, both have municipally-owned theatres. Neither one has a single dedicated staff member, not one.

All functions connected with the theatres are either done by Town employees with a variety of other responsibilities, or by volunteers. As someone with frequent experience with those facilities, I can tell you the arrangement *does not work*. At least one dedicated, qualified on-site employee is essential. But does a 300-seat theatre, even one with all the latest bells and whistles, require \$170,000 in staff? Maybe not.

In searching for a long-term solution to the Latham Gallery's funding problems, the ever-practical but arts-oriented Mayor seems determined to trim the operating budget in order to make it survive. Her gently-applied knife will probably be taken to the theatre's operations as well. But she seems to believe it will have no problem getting actually built. A lot of people desperately want to believe her.



GLORIA - This is one the stunning magnified portraits by Sandra Brewster featured in Reflections on Cool, currently on exhibit at the Latham Gallery.

FACES on the Street

Our question this month, asked at the Whitchurch-Stouffville Public Library:

"What is the best feature about the library for you?"



Paula O'Farrell:

"The Internet. There are plenty of computers with fast and easy access, and I can use the printer very cheaply. It's also a quiet, comfortable work environment for a college student like me."



Marvin Lim

"The Internet is very fast, and the connections are right up-to-date; I can use my lap-top here if I want. Mostly I play games on the net, especially chess. The library is very airy and bright."



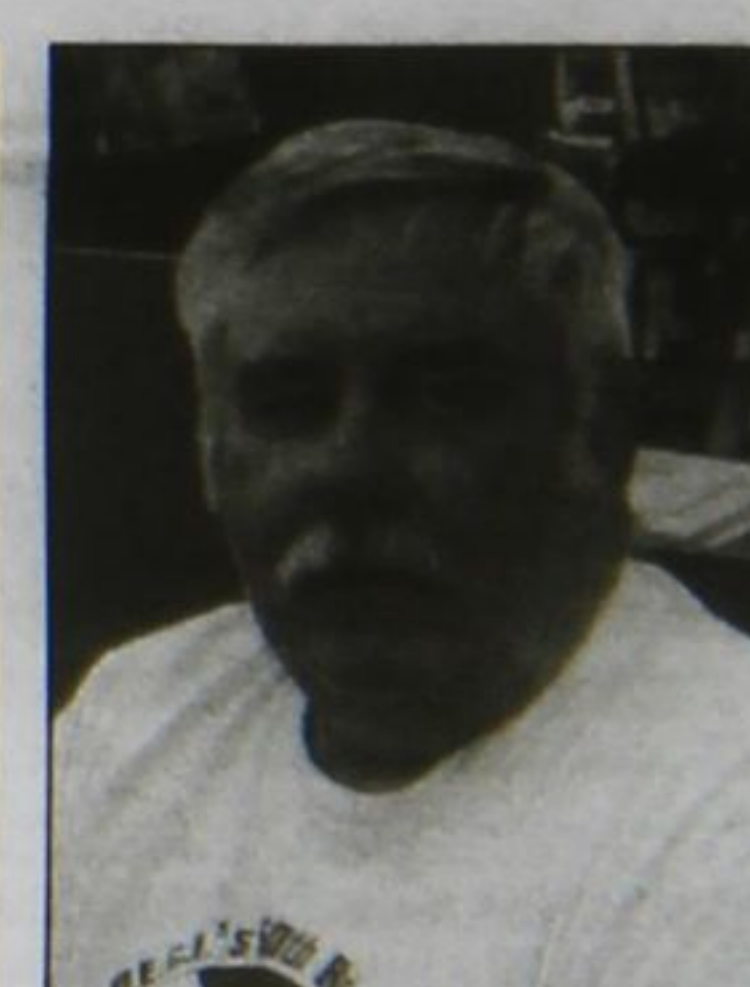
Vic Montesano:

"It's a quiet place for private study, away from the bustle of home. I just like to sit and read here in a warm, quiet corner."



Jenny Brown:

"My friends and I can come here together and use the Internet for MSN. It's great. And we like to do our homework here, where there's peace and quiet."



Don Jackson:

"There are so many great things about it: an excellent selection of books and newspapers, up-to-date research services, dedicated staff, and a bright and spacious environment."

MOLLER INSURANCE

Home ★ Auto

905-642-2745

64 Sandiford Drive, Unit 1,
STOUFFVILLE

Eye Care in Stouffville with Retinal Scanning Technology



Drs. McDowell and Genin
Optometrists • 6085 Main St. • 905 642-3937