

she declares. "Here was a man whom most people have loved for years. He was charming off-stage and on."

The rocky economy didn't affect them as much as they thought it might.

"We did discover that our clientele is extremely loyal," she says. "We did have an exodus of some people moving out of state, who were on fixed incomes, and we'll miss those people. But the economy didn't affect us as much as we thought it would. We haven't figured our final numbers, but we really had the biggest year in our history in the hall, the biggest in sales volume and biggest in number of people. That was very good for us."

For the **Florida Repertory Theatre**, celebrating their 10th season, things started out a little rough in the beginning, but improved as the season continued. An updated, condensed version of "Romeo and Juliet," performed by the Classical Theatre of Harlem, was a hit with the high school students who saw it for free. But paying audiences didn't seem eager to attend.

"In some ways, our greatest failure and our greatest success of the season was the same show," says Robert Cacioppo, Florida Rep's artistic producing director. The production not only introduced many high school students to theater for the first time, but initiated partnerships with the Lee County School District and Chicos.

"It was quite a season," Cacioppo says. "We started off this 10th season so far behind the eight ball, we were expecting to have a quarter million-dollar loss this year. And we've had four years in the black, so we've been very stable financially as an arts organization."

A favorite for Cacioppo, from a personal directing standpoint, was the two-man show, "Stones in His Pockets."

"I know it was a really difficult show to pull off, and I felt we did a really bang-up job. It didn't light up the box office, but it



COURTESY PHOTO

**Theatre Conspiracy found a home this year and produced five shows.**

did well and made us numbers," he says.

The show that followed, the quirky "Almost, Maine," though an artistic success, did poorly.

"They say theater people like the unique, and the masses like the familiar," Cacioppo says. He suspects audiences may have liked the play better if it had followed the same people throughout, rather than being a series of vignettes about different people in the same town.

Things started turning around with their production of the Pulitzer Prize-winning play, "Doubt."

"[Before 'Doubt,'] we really thought, 'Oh my God, this is going to be a disastrous season. We all felt extremely proud of 'Doubt.' Again, Maureen Heffernan, as a director, brought such a great touch," Cacioppo says. "And again, Maureen got to

direct a pretty flawless play."

"A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," their first musical, brought in their largest audience in four years. And "Breaking Legs," which followed, was also a big crowd pleaser.

"So these three shows, plus a really great fundraising event, didn't totally salvage the season, but took us to an off-year, rather than a disastrous one," Cacioppo says. "So 2008 was really great. A year ago, when we decided the season, the economy and the housing market were not in the shape that they're in now. You can't really change a horse mid-stream."

Closing with the two-man play "Visiting Mr. Green" added to their success. Michael Edwards, the artistic producing director of the Asolo Theater in Sarasota, attended closing night and decided to cast both ac-

tors and use the same director for their next season.

"It's very interesting that we opened our season with a collaboration with the Classical Theatre of Harlem and closed our season with a show that would be remounted and brought to the Asolo, which is one of the oldest regional theaters in America," Cacioppo says. "So I think we've been in good company this year."

In contrast, **The Naples Players at the Sugden Community Theatre** experienced their most successful season, much to their surprise.

"We had a terrific season this year with our highest attendance records ever," says artistic director Dallas Dunnagan. A number of things contributed to that success. "I think it's everything from show quality to extra marketing to the [Naples] dinner theater not being here anymore," which brought more attendance to the Sugden's musicals, she says.

"Perfect Wedding," which she describes as "a fun little show, a cross between a romantic comedy and a door-slaming farce," almost completely sold out before opening.

They started their season last summer with "Beauty and the Beast" which "took off like gangbusters," she says. "That pushed our momentum forward. Everyone seemed to like 'I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change,' then 'Cabaret' did really well. We just didn't have a bad season this year."

Edgier shows in the Tobye Studio, their black box, also did well, especially "Humble Boy" and Edward Albee's "The Goat."

"There's always a demand for that kind of thing," Dunnagan says. "If it hasn't been done and done and done, you want to go see it and see what it's about."

"We don't seem to have been hurt by the economic problems at all, which sort of surprises me. But theater has a history: when times are hard, people still go. People want to be taken out of themselves." ■

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