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Looking beyond the Tonys, women on Broadway seek to increase their numbers

THERESA AGOVINO



The Dicapo Opera Theatre Michael Capasso founded needs an angel investor if it's to perform in NYC again. Buck Ennis

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Michael Capasso, sitting in the theater he built for the opera company he created, recalled the moment 18 years ago when the orchestra pit flooded during construction of his Dicapo Opera Theatre.

"Everybody was just freaking out," said Mr. Capasso inside the empty theater on a recent rainy day. Not him. He knew the problem was an easy fix because he'd worked in

construction before founding the company, which shares its name with its theater, 32 years ago.

These days, it's Mr. Capasso who's scared. Severe debt caused by fundraising shortfalls forced the opera company to go on a hiatus last month, canceling three productions in an attempt to save money and avoid bankruptcy. Creditors, which are owed a total of $600,000, are being asked to wait six months for their money.

Mr. Capasso knows he needs to act fast. He also knows what will solve the crisis. "I need an angel," he said with no trace of irony, even though the theater is in a church basement on the Upper East Side.

Finding one won't be simple. Mr. Capasso is praying for divine intervention. Meanwhile, he's searching for donors and considering staging productions out of town to raise money.

Mr. Capasso doesn't understand why Dicapo hasn't attracted blue-chip philanthropists. Its productions have a history of accolades from *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. Dicapo has also been crowned the city's third opera after the Metropolitan Opera and New York City Opera because of its permanent home and robust number of productions, even though its $1.2 million budget is dwarfed by those of its compatriots. It's even been dubbed the "closest thing New York has to a mini-Met."Dicapo earns more of its budget from operations than its brethren, which rely heavily on fundraising. Most opera companies are dependent on donations, so Mr. Dicapo believed philanthropists would admire the company's self-reliance. "People keep telling me they love what I'm doing, but nobody wants to write a check," said Mr. Capasso. "A $250,000 donation would save my life, and at the Met they wouldn't even appreciate it." His plight is emblematic of that of many small arts organizations, whose missteps are amplified during hard times. It's also the tale of how a founder's passion for an organization can blind him to practicalities. Mr. Capasso ignored basic principles that other opera companies swear by, failing to cultivate a strong donor base and management team.
Mr. Capasso fell in love with opera when, as a 7-year-old, he was introduced to the works of Enrico Caruso by his grandfather. He knew he wasn't talented enough to become a professional singer, so he joined the family construction business. But after dabbling in staging operas for a few years, he started Dicapo with his former music teacher in 1981, producing *Tosca* in a now-defunct Long Island theater.

For years, he produced operas in different venues, even staging holiday performances at department stores. Then, in 1991, Dicapo was given the chance to build a permanent theater in the basement of St. Jean Baptiste Church on Lexington Avenue and East 76th Street. Mr. Capasso called in every favor he could from his construction days and even operated the backhoe himself. The 204-seat theater was built in 100 days. Reviewers extolled the pleasures of watching an opera in an intimate setting."He was there all the time," said the Rev. John Kamas, who was the church's pastor at the time

and is on Dicapo's board. "You can't believe his dedication."Mr. Capasso is so committed to Dicapo that he says he hasn't drawn a salary in years and recently took a construction management job to make ends meet. Despite his sacrifice, he still has numerous creditors, including his publicist, the church and numerous musicians and singers. Donations fell to about $100,000 last year from $400,000 five years earlier. Law firm Duane Morris is working pro bono to keep creditors at bay while Mr. Capasso tries to raise money. "Taking the hiatus was the hardest decision I've ever made in my life," said Mr. Capasso. He had hoped donations would flow in 2011, when the company celebrated its 30th anniversary. They didn't. The anniversary gala raised only $25,000.Dicapo's predicament is an odd twist for an organization run by someone who prides himself on bringing business standards to the nonprofit world. Mr. Capasso boasts that 60% of Dicapo's budget comes from earned income like ticket sales and costume rentals, while the industry average is about 40%. But opera experts say Mr. Capasso's 60% is actually a weakness."It is a sign you aren't raising enough money," said Marc Scorca, president and CEO of Opera America, a service organization. He said operas are notoriously expensive to produce, so the art form has always been heavily dependent on donors.One attribute that has helped another company, Gotham Chamber Opera, is its defined mission, according to its executive director, David Bennett. Since it performs only chamber operas, "our donors see it as a complement to the Met as opposed to competing with them," he said.Mr. Bennett said that because Dicapo produces a wide range of operas, from the classics to newer works, it is more challenging to create a targeted fundraising message. He added that fundraising is time-consuming and that Mr. Capasso has his hands full with other responsibilities."Michael runs the company, he directs, he produces, he builds sets," said Mr. Bennett. "It takes a lot of time and effort to fundraise, and you can't do it if you are directing and producing, too."

Insurmountable odds

Mr. Capasso said he wears many hats because he'd rather pour money into productions, not staff. He adds that over the years he's never had a board that has raised enough money to give him the opportunity to employ more managers. In 2010, one donor promised him $100,000 to hire a fundraising consultant but gave him only $6,000.Rev. Kamas agreed that the board wasn't very effective at raising money. It also wasn't particularly critical of Mr. Capasso's management style."The productions were just so beautiful, and everyone loved them," he said.Now Mr. Capasso is working to replenish the board, which has dwindled to six from 11 about a year ago. Early results haven't been promising.One member, Judy Iovino, has never been on a board before, but she joined six months ago because she loves opera and Mr. Capasso is an old friend. She has asked 25 people for money—seven have said yes—and has raised about $10,000."People already have their pet charities," she said.Mr. Capasso can't get potential donors to a performance because the company is on hiatus. And even if he does find the funds to stage one, hiring people to work for him might be challenging because the company already owes many singers and musicians money.He insists that he has built up enough good will over the years that people will join his casts. His latest idea is to stage productions in cities where there are no longer any opera companies so the performance will be more of a novelty. He's reached out to some theaters, but it's too soon to say whether the plan will work.

Meanwhile, Mr. Capasso remains hopeful that he'll find his angel. "I am optimistic," he said. "This company is my life."

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