

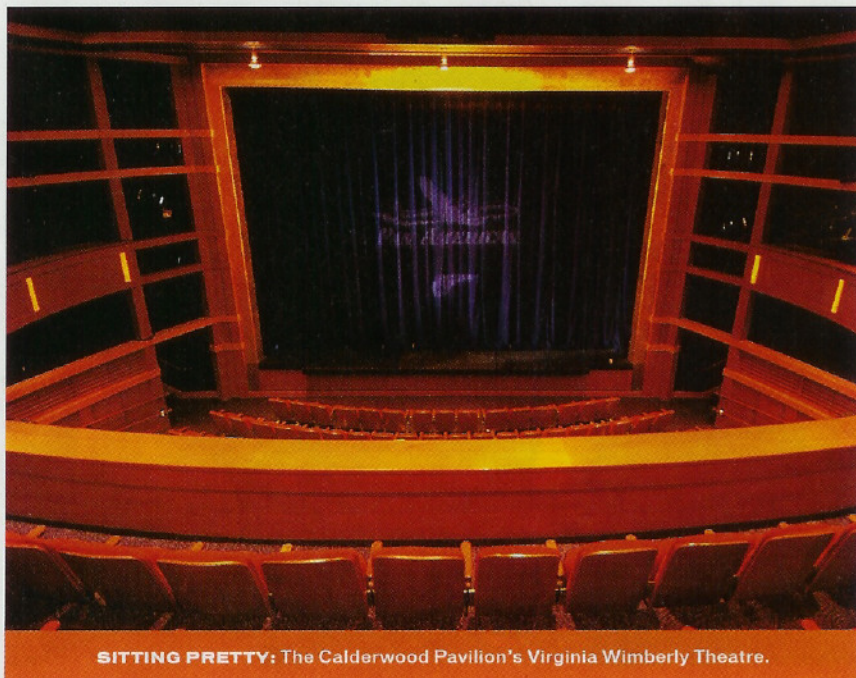
## Selling the Stage

With competition heating up, Boston theater companies need to market themselves or die. By Bill Marx

When it comes to theater in Boston, Darwin is writing the script. Not only is there increasing competition from other entertainment choices, but the city is breaking in several new stages, from the two theaters in the Boston Center for the Arts' Calderwood Pavilion to the New Repertory Theatre's new home in Watertown. Small and medium-sized companies think growth is the key to their survival. And with so many new seats to fill, theaters are doing what most American businesses do when the going gets tough: getting serious about marketing.

For starters, 20 local theater companies have bonded together to form the Theatre Arts Marketing Alliance, a group with an impressive combined economic clout, serving some 250,000 audience members annually with combined annual budgets of \$6.8 million. It's a collective turn that reflects economic realpolitik, since, to expand their audiences, the companies know they'll need to pool resources. Their first project was a survey to help small and medium-sized theaters understand their audiences.

The results contained a few sur-



SITTING PRETTY: The Calderwood Pavilion's Virginia Wimberly Theatre.

prises. People who attend the city's smaller theaters say they love the intimacy and quality of the productions, they find ticket prices affordable, and they prefer plays that are "challenging and thought provoking." Intriguingly, most of these people don't attend concerts, Broadway-type theater, professional sports, or dance performances. This means that the smaller companies aren't in competition with giants, except in the eternal quest for donor and corporate dollars.

The demographics proved more predictable, according to Janet Bailey, an arts marketing consultant who helped design the survey. Theater, as a form of entertainment, generally appeals most

to the over-45 crowd. Younger audience members buy tickets at the last minute and seldom read about theater in newspapers. "It changes how companies plan, since they don't have an assured audience," says Bailey. "Trying to figure out ways to make young audience members plan ahead may be fruitless. Maybe theaters should adopt different strategies and forgo the old-fashioned dependence on sending out brochures."

For Nicholas Peterson, marketing associate at the New Repertory Theatre, the traditional rules no longer hold in the brave new world of arts marketing. "We are going to have to be more creative, be more ambitious and innovative," Peterson says. He points to the need for more "family-friendly" productions. Jim Torres, who is the marketing director of the SpeakEasy Stage Company, says his troupe is lowering ticket prices for younger audiences.

Bailey admits that the new marketing association's first steps look modest, especially given Peterson's belief that "those stages that market will live and those that don't will die." But she explains that theaters "are just getting their feet wet. Audience-building takes a long time. Down the road, the group will come up with collaborative projects and not shy away from larger ones." Does Bailey sense any panic? "No," she says. "Theaters are used to living life on the edge."