

STEVEN B. LIBMAN

MAGIC MOMENT

CEO's act requires recruiting top talent and staying within budget

By Jay Harvey
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Among the arts Steven B. Libman practiced as a boy growing up in Rhode Island was magic. He got quite good at it, he recalled, but like any other performing skill, his sleight-of-hand — lacking recent practice — mostly vanished.

Now the 51-year-old CEO and president of the Center for the Performing Arts will try to achieve magical results on a large scale, if he's lucky. He's certainly in practice, having started his job in fall 2009 and bringing to it years of running a major ballet company and a major theater company.

The new Carmel facility's flagship performing space, the Palladium, opens Saturday, launching a half-season of touring musicians and dancers among five series.

Fooling the eye may work for magicians, but Libman has to put verifiable numbers behind claims of success in the wake of the economic recession. The most recent figures reported are more than 18,000 tickets sold (value: just over \$1 million).

"We're selling at a faster rate than we thought we would," he said. "The Country Series (featuring concerts with Vince Gill, Clint Black, the Charlie Daniels Band and the Wright Brothers Band) will sell out soon."

Libman studied theater and mime in high school and college, but he gravitated to the business side while still in high school.

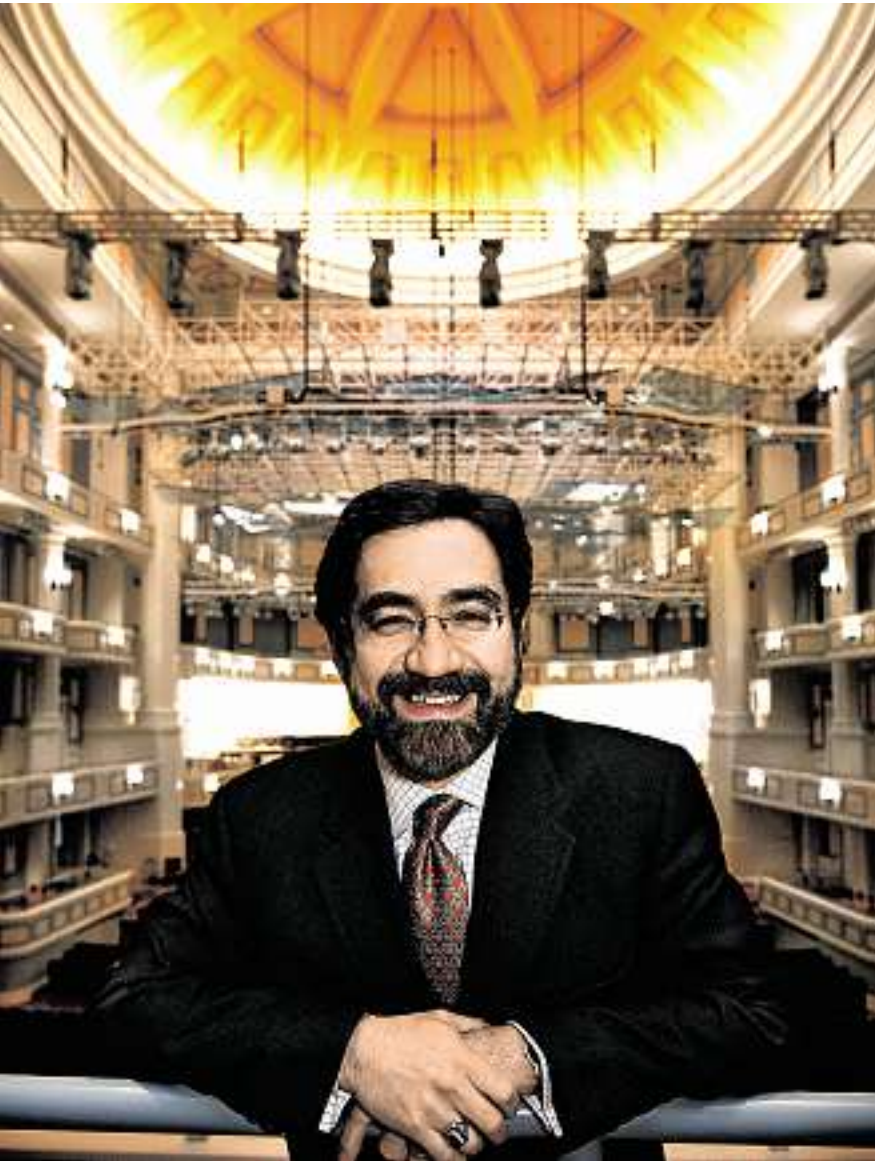
After his initial college choice didn't satisfy his theater yearnings, he transferred to Rhode Island College, whose link to the Trinity Repertory Company immersed him in professional theater.

He blended studies in management, economics and theater to craft a degree in performing arts management, getting practical experience as he went. Upon interning at the Trinity company after graduation in 1980 — "I managed 20,000 subscribers, without computers!" — Libman got management jobs with theaters in Syracuse, N.Y., and Lancaster, Pa.

From 1987 to 2004, Libman managed the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre.

"He left an incredible legacy here," said the company's artistic director, Terrence Orr. "He was primarily responsible for starting the endowment."

Orr also cited Libman's collaborations with other arts organizations and his help in developing new work, some of it using the music of rock stars like Sting and Bruce Springsteen, to attract new audiences.



FRANK ESPICH / The Star

Steven B. Libman has set a ceiling on artist fees at the Palladium, where he is CEO. Previously, he managed a facility in La Jolla, Calif., and the Pittsburgh ballet.

While at Pittsburgh, he also led a campaign that raised \$1.5 million in renovation funds and a \$2 million campaign keyed to a new production of "The Nutcracker."

Just before coming to Carmel, Libman worked in California as a consultant and director of the La Jolla Playhouse, a large operation with four companies. It is

a favorite site for development of new shows, including "Jersey Boys," which played in Indianapolis last spring.

"It was clear from his resume that he had a hands-on approach to relationships" with patrons and sources of support, said Carmel Mayor Jim Brainard. "And he had an entrepreneurial attitude toward building up a staff from scratch. He couldn't wait to get here."

Libman was attracted to the Carmel job, he said, because "it's very rare to work on the ground floor and have a say in the construction of a venue as well as hiring and programming."

The other lure? Libman and his wife, Keitha, have a daughter living in Cincinnati, and she and her husband have two sons.

With a staff of 40 (20 of them full time), Libman expects to welcome 100,000 customers a year into the Palladium, and after the Studio Theater and the Tarkington Theater open later this year, an additional 150,000 to 200,000 to the performing arts center.

The 2012-13 season will represent the first for all three venues to have 12-month seasons. By then, the staff is likely to be even larger.

Libman anticipates that half of the Palladium's projected \$8 million annual budget will come from rental fees, ticket sales and concessions; the rest, from contributions. The Carmel City Council has committed \$2 million a year.

Even success beyond his wildest dreams would not enable the Palladium to pay its own way: "I'd have to charge \$150 a ticket and sell out every seat in order to make money," Libman said.

To compensate, he has artist-fee ceilings that he won't go above — taking full advantage of how the recession has driven down what performers charge.

And despite being the head of a new concert hall in Central Indiana, Libman said he doesn't regard other arts presenters in the area as competitors.

When scheduling artists, Libman said he avoids going head-to-head with other venues or bringing in an artist he knows is due nearby in the not-too-distant future.

"Our real competition is not each other," Libman noted, but home entertainment.

"It's our challenge to develop programming that you can't get on DVD."

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