

Curtain call for LTCC theater department

By Kathryn Reed

To be, or not to be, that is the question regarding Lake Tahoe Community College's Theater Arts Department. Only it won't be Hamlet answering the question.

Ultimately it will be up to the board of education to decide if the department is disbanded, which is the recommendation of staff.



Susan
Boulanger

On Oct. 18, Susan Boulanger, who has run the department since 2009, was told of the likely demise of her department.

She doesn't know if she can fight it, or if she would even try. The rawness of the announcement was still so fresh just a day later.

"Enrollment is down and I don't know what to do. It's just fricking heartbreaking to me. I would have liked to have had a little more time to try some different things," Boulanger told *Lake Tahoe News*. What those thing might have been she could not articulate.

"It's not only my loss to not do the shows, but it's heartbreaking for the people in the community who want to do

theater. We are the only game in town," Boulanger added.

That is the double-edged problem for LTCC. It was never just a college program. Many of the actors in the productions were from the community. Yet, most of the classes were students, not the community actors.

Even though the theater community on the South Shore is small, it is also fractionalized. Boulanger has her domain at the college, Liz Niven rules the roost at South Tahoe High School and then there is Valhalla – the summer community arts festival.

Boulanger has been divisive since she got here seven years ago and since then has not wanted to mend or build bridges. It's to the point many STHS students don't enroll in LTCC's classes.

Niven, who also has a reputation for being stubborn, had a good working relationship with LTCC in the past. After all, she was an adjunct faculty member at the theater program before she got the job to run the high school's department.

Boulanger has also been reluctant to work with Valhalla. Many question why the black box theater is dark in the summer, when so many people are in town. The only time it hasn't been was in 2014 when "August: Osage County" was staged there by Valhalla.

What has sustained Boulanger these seven years is that she is well regarded as a director. In the fall and winter she puts on a play, with the spring performance being a musical. Before her tenure there was a time when the college staged four productions in an academic year. Boulanger has been praised for most of her shows, with some singling out "Death of a Salesman," which was performed in the round.



The fall 2015 production of "Death of a Salesman" was highly praised. Photo/LTCC

But she isn't a collaborator, and that is what's needed to keep theater alive on the South Shore. In most places the theater community is close-knit, they go to each other's productions and cross promote. That doesn't happen here.

No matter Boulanger's personality, for the college administration, it all came down to numbers.

In 2011-12 the 188 students in theater arts equated to 25.26 full-time equivalent students. Those numbers for 2015-16 dropped to 82 enrollees or 14.61 FTES. That's a decline of just more than 56 percent. Usually one degree per year was awarded, with 2011-12 hitting a record of three. To the college, that is unacceptable.

There were not enough students to sustain the lone faculty member. (Years ago the department had one full-time and two adjunct faculty members.)

Most small colleges don't offer much in the way of theater classes. The only vibrant program is College of the Siskiyous, which is down the road from Ashland, Ore.

But the enrollment numbers at LTCC were going down even when Dave Hamilton ran the program before Boulanger took over.

Boulanger attributed the declining enrollment in part to the increase in tuition and the town not recovering from the recession.

The change in how the state stopped students from taking classes over and over again for credit did not impact the theater program like it did physical education and culinary arts.

This has been a department that has always had to fight for its existence. It just seems like now might be the final curtain call, at least in terms of a traditional college program.

Boulanger's future with the college remains to be seen. Today, she'd like to keep teaching. There is a process for her to go through to make that happen. She also said she might like to be part of the next incarnation of theater at LTCC.

There is a process for ending the theater program. The Academic Senate will hear the case. This is set for Nov. 4, but could be moved up. Normally it's not until two weeks later that those members would take a vote on the issue. This would be an advisory vote. In the end it's the board of trustees who cast the final and deciding vote.

Staff is recommending the college put money into helping create a community theater that would be run by a nonprofit.

"We would like to see more productions like music or dance festivals. All kinds of things could be going on in that theater all the time," LTCC President Kindred Murillo told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We believe the community theater model would bring all the people interested in theater to the college to do productions."