

Arsht Center headed in right direction

OUR OPINION: Summer programming lures new audiences, excites arts lovers

'If at first you don't succeed . . .' could be the mantra for the Performing Arts Center Trust, the independent group that oversees operations at the county-owned Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts. Faced with huge operating cost overruns for the center in 2007, its first year of operation, the Trust didn't waste time or make excuses. It found new management in Larry Wilker, former president of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Becoming indispensable

Mr. Wilker, appointed the Arsht Center's interim president and CEO, turned tradition on its ear by lining up programming at the center through the summer, usually a dormant period.

The plan worked. It lured 120,000 people to 120 performances in June, July and August and garnered \$3.5 million in ticket sales. The center ends the summer season \$1 million in the black. Last year, the center attracted 11,000 people to 50 events and faced the fall season in debt.

The center is by no means a raging financial success with a guaranteed future of steadfast community support. But it is beginning to insinuate itself into this diverse community's consciousness. Making itself indispensable to the community is necessary if the Arsht Center is to serve as our cultural and social linchpin. It can't do that if the performance halls are empty for two or three months. That's not how South Florida operates any more.

There was a time when this region folded its wings during the summer -- socially, culturally and even, to an extent, commercially since tourism almost dried up in June, July and August. No more. While tourism slows in summer, many visitors, especially from Europe thanks to the weak dollar, take advantage of comparatively lower hotel rates. For instance, the number of American Airlines passengers has been climbing through July, according to the latest figures. The region's stable population is now large enough to sustain summer cultural venues.

Local culture

Under the savvy Mr. Wilker, the Arsht Center has taken advantage of all this, using the summer to experiment with niche programming. For instance, *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz* and the original show, *Miami Libre*, brought in older Cuban audiences who were new to the center, says Trust chairman Ricky Arriola. Mr. Wilker believes that next summer will provide more expanded programming. That means programming that might be considered experimental elsewhere but that is filling a cultural gap here.

Mr. Wilker leaves in December, so the Trust is busy finding his successor. Let it be someone who sees the Arsht Center's rich potential to be an invaluable centerpiece of the community's diverse urban fabric.