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DAYTON - **Mark Light** has been the veritable czar of performing arts in downtown Dayton performing for many of his 15 years here.

Mostly behind the scenes, not in view of the audiences who know him best for strutting on stage like George M. Cohan and giving a rousing, positive opening night speech, he has ruffled some feathers, bruised some egos and bested all competitors while expanding a tidy domain into a truly impressive one that straddles Main Street.

But there were no audible sighs of relief when he announced his retirement Tuesday as president of the Victoria Theatre, Arts Center Foundation and Dayton Opera - or, as the national entertainment publication Variety headlined it: 'Light ankles Victoria Theater; Dayton opera prexy ends reign.'

He will definitely be missed, although exactly how and why remains to be seen as he heads off at 51 to do management consulting, write books, spend more time with his three sons and ailing parents, and work toward a Ph.D. at Antioch University in leadership and change.

We may not see his like again when it comes to doing something he has done here better than most presenters anywhere have done so consistently. To put it in Variety-like showbiz lingo, he has put fannies in the seats. And that's what this business is about.

Although he has also been a lights-out fund-raiser for the VTA and ACF, and has been compensated handsomely for it, his success at building and retaining attendance has been the true source of his power.

For the time being, things should roll merrily along as they have since the Schuster Performing Arts Center opened almost perfectly, except for a public open house that attracted too many people - there's that attendance thing again.

Since then, Light has been out of sight for extended periods. He's been out of town a lot.

He and wife Joanie put their house in Oakwood up for sale several months ago. There were rumors he might be looking for a job elsewhere. But Light says they aren't leaving. 'We love it here. We've just been thinking about downsizing,' he said.

Through a consulting firm he has run as a sideline, he's advising developers of arts projects in two other cities, but wouldn't specify the locations 'because the people I'm working with don't want to read about it in the paper yet,' he said last week.

Staff members like Dione Kennedy, executive director for programming; Sheila Spencer, executive director for administration, and Justin Reiter, general manager, are three reasons why things should keep rolling along. They've come up through the ranks under Light and/or have bought into the Victoria's unwavering mission of customer service from the box office to the exit.

Kennedy, who has been on maternity leave for several weeks following birth of her first child, took over show selection duties a few years ago. 'She'll come and tell me what she's decided because she thinks I may want to know. But she doesn't ask me. It's her decision,' Light said. 'Sheila knows things about running this organization that I have never and could never understand. They've been running this organization quite well and will continue to do so,' he said.

Light realized 'it was time for me to go about a year ago.

'Joanie and I came downtown to see the Dayton Opera's production of La Boheme, but we took a walk to check on a few things before the show. We came through the Victoria Theatre where the Gem City Ballet was performing. Who knew? A new ballet company in the city? The box office was running smoothly and everything looked fine.

'We went next door and up to The Loft Theatre where The Spitfire Grill was playing. The box office was running well. The sound quality was excellent. Everything seemed perfectly fine.

'We crossed the street back to the Schuster. There were nothing but happy, contented people to be seen. Everything was running smoothly. The opera was wonderful. Afterward, I told Joanie, 'It's over. I'm a ghost,' ' Light said.

If the powerful don't often evoke immediate and universal affection when they step down, his announcement was met with tears by many on the Victoria's staff Tuesday.

What it will mean in the arts community remains to be seen.

Marsha Hanna, artistic director of the city's resident professional theater company, The Human Race, said, 'It's hard to imagine - after so many years of influence in Dayton - that Mark will suddenly retire from active duty and disappear into his private consultancy

business. I'm waiting to see what he has in his future that will channel his tremendous business creativity. What's on the horizon that awaits his energy?'

Dayton Philharmonic music director Neal Gittleman, said, 'Once you've gone through the incredible rush that Mark's been through the past five years, keeping things running can't possibly seem as exciting as getting them up and running. I suspect that Mark's a guy who loves a challenge, and is looking for another challenge to take on.'

Gittleman doubts it's a signal that the city's arts are in for a downturn.

'If anything, I think we're seeing a great upturn in the arts in Dayton. In its first year, the Schuster Center was a novelty. It was, to a certain extent, the show all by itself. Now you have the resident groups -- the DPO, the Opera, Dayton Ballet - settling in, and using the great platform the Mead Theatre gives them to put on the strongest performances that Dayton has ever seen.'

Tom Bankston, artistic director of the Dayton Opera, said Light's decision 'was a surprise and it wasn't. Mark is such an entrepreneurial person that it makes sense he would want to look for a new challenge and new conquests after accomplishing so much.'

Dayton Contemporary Dance Company executive director Noreen Willhelm said Sheila Spencer visited DCDC offices before the announcement was made public 'so we wouldn't have to learn about it in the newspaper. Most of our contact has been with the staff at the Victoria and the Schuster, not so much with Mark. The thing about him is how important he's been in setting the stage for expectations about arts fund-raising. He has shown everyone that there's considerable money in the community for the arts.'

If attendance at Crazy for You, the opener in the Victoria's Broadway on Main series, is any indication, the fannies are still filling the seats. Whether or not that will continue at the same pace without Light will be a major challenge for his successor or successors.

Bankston said it would be 'foolish' to try to find another **Mark Light**. 'He's a unique and dynamic individual.'

Gittleman recommends that 'We should all give Mark a well-deserved bravo for all he's done and all he's accomplished. And we should demand at least as much from his successor.'

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All right, now what?

The big news on the local arts beat this week was that the 800-pound gorilla who's been in charge of Dayton's performing-arts jungle for the last 15 years has decided to move on. As president of the Victoria Theatre Association and its associated arts groups, **Mark Light** has been the central, dominant force that has driven, shaped - and this is important - nurtured the arts community that Dayton enjoys today. The word `nurturing' may not be the first one that comes to mind for many of the folks who've had run-ins with Light over the years - his temper, along with his willingness to let it flare, were once legendary, though he has mellowed in the last few years. And yet, nurturing is the part of his legacy here that requires the most consideration, scrutiny and concern as the search for his successor begins.

Light's impressive string of successes are well-documented in Terry Morris' story on this page. Light will be remembered, and properly so, for what he calls `the golden age of arts infrastructure' here - spearheading a remarkable expansion in audience, budget and buildings. He arrived in time to get the newly renovated Victoria Theatre off and running; he consolidated offices and studios for most of the city's performing arts groups in the Metropolitan Arts Center next door; he oversaw the construction of the Schuster Center and helped raise the money that will keep it going. He has also put in place a cadre of extremely capable executives who will now be responsible for running the show after he leaves at the end of the year.

So, back to our original question: Now what?

First, there will be something of a power vacuum. For a long time, Light has had the authority and influence to not only make things happen, but also make things not happen, if he didn't like them. Leaders of others arts groups in town would get Light's input, if not his approval, on projects and fund-raising efforts before they got under way. It will be interesting to see who, if anyone, steps up to exercise that authority now,

especially with so many groups needing so much these days in such tough economic times.

Second, there's that nurturing thing. Under Light, the Victoria Theatre Association grew to pre-eminence - but it also raised a protective umbrella that allowed many smaller, less-funded groups to live and flourish. The Dayton Opera and the Human Race Theatre Company both came in from the financial cold under Light, and he let it be known that other organizations were welcome if need be.

More importantly, he saw to it that that nonprofit arts organizations got the financial help they needed to perform on the Victoria and Schuster stages. Under what Light refers to as a `double subsidy,' the Victoria and Arts Center Foundation keep rates affordable so that organizations like the Dayton Ballet, Cityfolk and others can thrive. For a nonprofit arts climate in any city to thrive, somebody has to foot the cost. Light has made sure his organization is willing and able.

It's obvious that his departure opens up discussions about the leadership, organizational structure and future of Dayton's arts, and those conversations have already begun. But the biggest fear one might have would be the arrival of a successor who does not share his vision for supporting as many companies as possible, or who feels that the Victoria and Arts Center Foundation can not afford to continue working as they have. Put purely on a cold-hearted business model, it's almost certain that some organizations would close without somebody like Light to keep them going.

Dayton Opera Artistic Director Tom Bankston told the Dayton Daily News this week that it would be `foolish' to try to find another **Mark Light**. `He's a unique and dynamic individual,' Bankston said.

On the other hand, it doesn't seem like a bad idea to try.

Ron Rollins' column on arts and culture runs Sundays. Contact him at 225-2165 or at rrollins@daytondailynews.com.

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