

Online Wilton Villager

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— CURTAINS FOR NOW — Playshop closes during much needed overhaul



Workers from Mercer Construction work on repairing extensive water damage at the Wilton Playshop. PHOTO BY [ALEX VON KLEYDORFF](#)
By [JARED NEWMAN](#)

WILTON — With a poke of her finger, Zelie Pforzheimer demonstrated the Wilton Playshop's decay.

"We have a mold issue," she said, cracking part of a window frame with light pressure. "That's going to be happening here. See?"

Last week, appraisers discovered part of the building was barely standing. Pforzheimer, president of the Playshop since June, announced to her board members that the theater would be closed for six months. They postponed a scheduled performance of "A Christmas Story" until next year.

In the meantime, construction crews will swap rotting wood beams for fresh planks, replace rotting dry wall and patch holes that were covered years ago with temporary seals. The board just fixed all the exit signs, which burned out recently, but they still need to change the locks, because no one knows who has the keys. Pforzheimer is currently sending all the theater's musty costumes to the dry cleaners.

"It's almost a full-time job taking care of a building, as anyone who owns a home knows," Pforzheimer said.

The Playshop was founded in 1937 and moved to its current location on 15 Lovers Lane in 1953. As recently as the early 90s, it was a cultural hub in town. Audiences packed the 125-seat theater, and parking overflowed to Wilton Congregational Church down the street.

Skip Ploss, a former president who first performed at the Playshop in 1991, said auditions were always crowded. Over 100 people tried out for "A Chorus Line" in 1991.

He also said more people ran the show back then. All the board members had one or two volunteers underneath them, for a total of 20 to 30 people.

"What happens is, when you have an organization that has to get a show on, and if you have 30 people doing it, then you've got publicity, then you've got everything else happening," Ploss said. "When you start losing your support group because they're moving away or don't have time anymore, then you get into the trenches."

Sarah Friedman, a former board member, said the demographics of Fairfield County has changed in the last decade. During the peak of her involvement, she would dedicate seven nights a week to the theater. Working parents can't commit that much time, she said.

As the core supporters drifted from the theater, those who remained had less time to devote to it. They couldn't spend as much time fundraising, which made running the Playshop even more stressful. "It's a lot to sit through a meeting and hear we have no money," Friedman said. "It gets really hard after a while."

When funding dried up, the Playshop's directors did what they could to hold the next performance, but rarely noticed structural problems in the building, parts of which have been around since the late 1700s.

"I mean, yeah, there were issues with the building, and we took care of as much as we could," Friedman said, "... but the fact of the matter is that it's an old building."

Attendance declined as well, and Pforzheimer said actors avoided the theater not only because of small audiences, but because shows were often delayed or canceled. The last performance, "The Nerd," directed by Ploss, was held in March 2006.

During the summer, a new board of directors, including Pforzheimer, took the reins of the theater, inheriting \$25,000 of debt in addition to the damages she just discovered. Ploss stepped aside to give the board breathing room.

"They had some very good ideas and some very strong opinions, and I think they needed time to explore those," Ploss said.

Though the reconstruction is going well, some of the damage may be impossible to fix. The building will never be completely up to code, and the board members are nervous that the more they explore, the more problems they'll find.

"This building is never going to be one of those 'worms straight in a row' kind of buildings," Pforzheimer said.

Still, she wants to make the Playshop part of the community again. She envisions business functions and film screenings here, plus dances, weddings and birthday parties. The building could also function as a coffee house.

"I really have grand plans for this place," she said.

All told, Pforzheimer hopes to collect \$250,000 to restore the Playshop to its former glory. So far, the board is soliciting donations over the phone from family, friends and businesses. An off-site benefit show is in the works, but it won't take place until February or March.

"I think that the town as a whole would be behind this if they knew what was going on here," Pforzheimer said. Even when attendance was low and money was tight, she said, the performances were always good.

"The excellence achieved in this little community theater has been astounding," she said.

