The Very Little Theatre (Eugene, OR)
http://www.thevlt.com/

Background

The Very Little Theatre prides itself as being “one of the oldest and most successful community theatres in the country.” Founded in 1929, the VLT is in its 82nd season, having spent the last 50 years in their current Hilyard Street location. Prior to purchasing its current venue from the city, the VLT performed in several different venues throughout town, including a renovated drugstore and an exhibition hall at the fairgrounds. They currently have a subscriber base of approximately 1,600 season ticket holders, a number that has remained constant over the last decade. While the organization's mission has grown and changed since its first incarnation, it holds on to its ideas of community theatre for the sake of theatre, and not for monetary benefits. It's current mission statement reads: “The Very Little Theatre is a not-for-profit community theatre whose mission is to produce plays that entertain, educate, and inspire its patrons, members and participants. Its commitment to artistic excellence and the advancement of theatre arts shall not be for professional gain, but for the love of theatre.” The VLT prides itself on the idea of providing theatre for the community, by the community. It's also worth noting that the entire organization is run by volunteers. There are no paid staff members, and all income generated through ticket sales goes back into the organization, ensuring funds for building repairs and other operational costs.

Overall

My first impressions of the VLT website were positive. While the design of the site feels somewhat dated, it goes in keeping with the organization which comes across old fashioned, but I think they like it that way. The color scheme is heavy on red, which makes for a striking appearance when you first enter the website, but prolonged exposure leaves you feeling overwhelmed. The site is kept well updated; their last production closed a few weeks ago and their next one opens in about a month. Their next production, beginning in March, is the first show that comes up when entering the site, so there's no question as to what the VLT is producing next. Unfortunately, tickets are not available for sale on the website. The site functions as an informational resource for patrons and audience members, as well as internal communication for cast members and the VLT membership base as a whole.

Design and Navigation

What I like about the VLT's navigation is the left column that lists all the shows in the company's season with the opening dates. The icons they use to represent the shows are also effective—the consistency of using a circular shape keeps it clean and organized. My main issue with the VLT's website comes from its navigation setup, specifically the sub-navigation. The navigation and sub-navigation are all text links, which prevents them from standing out. The main navigation box also includes a Google Search box, a link to sign up for the VLT's newsletters, and a link to the Facebook page. This makes the navigation header too crowded. It becomes particularly problematic when you visit a page that includes sub-navigation, as the sub-navigation links get lost underneath all of the other stuff. I was using this site for another assignment, and I was trying to access information on the history of the organization. I went to the “About VLT” link and completely missed all the sub-navigation that appeared
that included detailed history on the organization. Part of it has to do with the fact that that sub-navigation comes up on the same neutral background that the left column has, which makes the sub-navigation bar sort of disappear. The sub-navigation, like the main-navigation and the link to the newsletter are all text links, so they're difficult to distinguish as separate entities and they all blend together.

Also somewhat problematic is the addition of the Google Calendar on their website. The intention is that the calendar serves as a faculties calendar, including all of the events happening in their theatre at any given time. This includes performances, rehearsals, meetings, and rentals. There is a key at the bottom of the calendar that indicates (reh) means it's a rehearsal, (perf) means performance, etc. The problem is that the events in the calendar aren't labeled according to the key, so for the rest of February, *Follies* is listed as happening at 6pm. *Follies* doesn't open until March 11, so one can only assume these are rehearsals.

**Prescription**

While a general design overhaul would be my first suggestion, what I know of the VLT leads me to believe that the old-fashioned look their website has is exactly what they want. That aside, their main and sub-navigation bars need to be redesigned. The main navigation links should be buttons that clearly stand out from the text on the page. The Google Search, newsletter subscription, and Facebook links should all be moved elsewhere. I understand that the VLT wants these links prominent and easy to access—more newsletter subscribers and more Facebook fans are always important, but not at the sake of masking the sub-navigation. The Google Search could go at the bottom of the left side column, underneath the organization's address and phone number. The newsletter subscription link should also be turned into a cute graphic button and could go in the left column with the Google Search or could be aligned right in the header. There could also be a separate main navigational link to the current newsletter with the subscription link. The sub-navigation links should appear directly beneath the main navigation and it would be helpful if they were buttons as well, but they wouldn't have to be. If they were to stay text links, I would recommend making the text size larger and have the underline appear on the roll-over.

The VLT should also work toward making tickets available for purchase via their website. This is less of a design issue and more of a functionality issue. Even theaters who pride themselves in their long history should work towards using the technology available to make ticket purchasing as easy on the customer as possible.

In addition, the VLT should consider having a separate website or blog for their members and production staff. A free Wordpress site would be appropriate and would make a clear distinction between what is audience related information and what is meant to stay behind the scenes. This could help alleviate any confusion caused by the Calendar, which if kept, should include properly labeled events. The idea of having all the company's information available on one site is interesting, and the VLT is small enough that they can get away with it, but consistency and organization are key if that is the model they wish to keep.