

From the Los Angeles Times

The Westside of L.A. gets another star

A new performing arts complex at Santa Monica College's satellite campus nears completion. By Chris Pasles Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

October 17, 2007

Santa Monica College is bustling these days. After 10 years of anticipation, a performing arts complex envisioned by actor and SMC alum Dustin Hoffman, artistic director Dale Franzen and a host of artistic advisors is ready to take center stage.

This morning, donors will have their first opportunity to tour the Stage and Second Space theaters (formerly the Madison campus). The complex was designed by Santa Monica architect Renzo Zecchetto, who will be on hand along with Franzen, SMC President Chui L. Tsang and Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky.

"This is unbelievable," Franzen said Monday. "Shortly we'll be opening the doors on a state-of-the-art theater that I dreamed of 10 years ago. The college has been visionary in making this project happen. This is not a typical community college theater. Broadway producers' mouths have dropped open when they've seen it."

The Stage, a 499-seat theater, is scheduled to open in May. The Second Space, a 99-seat black-box theater and rehearsal space, began operations in August and will initiate a free concert series, "Under the Radar," at 7 p.m. Sunday with the Los Angeles Tango Ensemble.

The 70,000-square-foot complex is on the north side of Santa Monica Boulevard between 10th and 11th streets, site of a former elementary school, and cost \$45 million. Of that, \$40 million was raised through two city bond measures, and \$5 million came from private donors.

In designing the theaters, Zecchetto incorporated an aesthetic and technological "wish list" from a committee that included Hoffman; tenor Plácido Domingo; the late Edgar Baitzel, former chief operating officer of L.A. Opera; Ruth Eliel, former executive director of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra; Lynn Rosenfeld, vice president of special projects at California Institute of the Arts; and New York producer Ron Kastner.

"What makes the Stage unique is an apparent duality," Zecchetto said. "It's built upon simultaneous intimacy and grandness. It's big and small at the same time."

The design, inspired by the "horseshoe" shape of Italian opera houses, allows eye contact with the actors and musicians onstage from any seat in the house. But the theater, despite its small seating area, has a variable proscenium and, according to SMC officials, a stage larger than UCLA's Royce Hall, which seats 1,833. The Stage will be able to accommodate a full orchestra onstage and a 45-member orchestra in the pit. The acoustician is Chris Jaffe of Santa Monica-based Jaffe Holden Acoustics.

"Theaters of this seating capacity can never do the things we can," Zecchetto said. "I do not think there is another performance space in the United States with these characteristics."

Hoffman, who is on location for a film, said in a statement: "The Westside of Los Angeles has never had anything of its kind. . . . It's a stage for dance, opera, musicals . . . and yet it's an intimate theater. It looks great."

SMC President Tsang said that "what the project comes down to is a sense of community."

"The community expects a great deal of this college because we've done such groundbreaking projects," he said. "This will cement our reputation and also provide a nurturing site for our young students, who can learn from each other and the great performers who will bring art to life in every level of our community."

Initially, the college expected to use the theater about 35% of the time, but as the project developed, the smaller Second Space was added. Now the college plans to use the Stage only 45 days a year, according to Donald Girard, the college's senior director of government relations.

That leaves the rest to Franzen and her artistic committee, which includes Hoffman, conductor Kent Nagano and choreographer Lula Washington.

"The initial season will be somewhere between 20 and 25 presentations," Franzen said. These will include projects with L.A. Opera, Nagano, the L.A. Baroque performance group Musica Angelica and others.

"But Rome wasn't built in a day," Franzen said. "I have to make sure my audience shares the vision. By the third year, we'll have a sense of who we are and what our place is here."

The "Under the Radar" series, however, is set. After the Tango Ensemble on Sunday, other groups or events will include L.A. Opera's Domingo/Thornton Youth Artists, the Latin jazz ensemble Otmaro Ruiz Group and a holiday cabaret concert.

There's one other opening.

"We still don't have a name for the Stage," Franzen said. "If there's someone out there who wants to put a name on the theater, now's the time to call."

chris.pasles@latimes.com