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Stages in development

Theater projects from Natomas to midtown promise relief for the space-hungry performing arts community

By Marcus Crowder - Bee Theater Critic
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This is the first in the "Growing in Stages" series, an occasional look at evolving performance venues in the area.

Opening soon in Sacramento: a pristine, state-of-the-art performance venue. Built at a cost of \$8.2 million, the technically advanced, 365-seat Benvenuti Performing Arts Center impresses by any standard. Its numerous amenities and production capabilities position it on the top rung of local arts facilities.

Local performing groups would be thrilled to work on its stage -- the Sacramento Philharmonic Orchestra is already scheduled, and the Sacramento Ballet has expressed serious interest.

However, first call goes to the high school students at Natomas Charter School. The striking, angular-roofed building was built by the school to showcase its performing arts academy. The young actors will work on a stage whose facilities compare to those of UC Davis' Mondavi Center and the Wells Fargo Pavilion.

That one of the region's best stages belongs to a high school illustrates a crossroads reached by local performing-arts groups. As they grow, becoming more sophisticated along with their audiences, venues haven't kept pace. However, there is some relief on the horizon, and the Benvenuti soon will have company as several long-planned projects take shape around Sacramento.

A 210-seat, cabaret-style theater will open in 2008 at 10th and K streets in the old Woolworth building. Uptown at 27th and Capitol, the B Street Theatre is planning a building with two theaters opening in 2010 amid the new Sutter Medical Center complex.

Finally, the most far-reaching plan is a performing-arts complex at the heart of a multi-use development at the downtown railyard that would likely include four theater spaces of various sizes and a performing arts academy.

Where can I hang my hat?

Every performing-arts group would love to have its own venue. It's like having your own house. You do with it what you want, fitting the place to your needs. Ensembles in Sacramento are no different.

"The issue is in the hearts and minds of most artists in our community," observes Donald Kendrick, artistic director of the Sacramento Choral Society. Kendrick's group, which has performed in New York, Europe and China, has no permanent home in Sacramento. He feels like a vagabond in Sacramento.

"I've been here for 22 years, and I'm still waiting for the right theater to appear for our group," Kendrick says.

A mid-1990s study commissioned by the city cited the need for additional venues for local performing

groups. In the intervening 10 years, the area has gained the Mondavi Center at UC Davis and the Wells Fargo Pavilion for the Music Circus.

The Mondavi, with the 1,801-seat Jackson Hall and the 200-seat Studio Theatre, books a world-class presenting season most of the year and occasionally hosts university-affiliated groups. Under terms of the city's agreement with its on-site neighbor the Sacramento Theatre Company, the Wells Fargo Pavilion operates only during the summer, when it presents the Music Circus.

Neither hall really addresses the needs of many Sacramento-based performing groups. Most theater groups scramble for limited openings at spaces such as California Stage, The Space, Thistle Dew Dessert Theatre and the Wm. J. Geery Theater.

Some groups, such as the compelling Synergy Stage ensemble, have gone on hiatus because they have no place to work. But there has been some positive movement, as the Lambda Players enterprisingly acquired its own small space -- a 49-seat theater on 17th Street, off Broadway.

In 2005, the Davis Musical Theatre Company built the \$1.2 million, 240-seat Hoblit Performing Arts Center in east Davis. And recently, the young community company Big Idea Theatre announced that it would take over the scruffy Actor's Theatre space on Del Paso Boulevard vacated by Ed Claudio, who ran a theater there for 16 years.

Meanwhile, the 3-year-old professional Capital Stage struggles with complications from working on the confining Delta King riverboat, which also houses a busy bar above the claustrophobic theater space and a noisy interactive dinner theater next door.

"We are pushing the capabilities of our current space to the limit," says Stephanie Gularte, Capital Stage's artistic director.

"Our long-term survival and growth as a professional company require a venue with greater seating capacity, more sophisticated production elements, and appropriate space for our actors, crew and staff."

For groups with complex needs and larger audiences, there's little available beyond the venerable 2,500-seat Community Center Theater, a useful but problematic building.

"It's a limiting issue on what we can possibly do here," says Timm Rolek, artistic director of Sacramento Opera. "We're still working with state-of-the-art 1974 technology backstage. The world is drastically different."

It's actually a whole new world, says Jonathan Williams, the Benvenuti's technical director, whose theater has computer-assisted capabilities no one else in the region can match. Williams is also an artistic associate with Capital Stage and is well aware of local theaters' capabilities.

"We can actually model shows in a three-dimensional virtual world before we put anything on the stage," Williams says of the high school theater. "This is the type of thing you find in big Broadway houses."

Besides modern technology, audience capacity is an issue, and intermediate-size venues are also on wish lists.

"We clearly have a big gap in sizes of theaters, and the 500-seat range and a 1,000- to 1,200-seat theater seem to be most requested by the operators," says Barbara Bonebrake, who works for the city as director of the Convention, Culture and Leisure Department.

Bonebrake says the city is in the final stages of hiring consultants for another study to assess where we are now and what the community could support.

Cabaret on K Street

The new theater closest to completion is a space at 10th and K being developed by David Taylor and

associates for use by California Musical Theatre and the Paragary restaurant group. Construction crews are gutting the former Woolworth building, and construction on a 210-seat cabaret theater is expected to begin soon.

The \$17 million project came together after California Musical Theatre executive producer Richard Lewis reasoned that he could model the success of colleagues in cities such as Pittsburgh and Denver who are doing well with smaller theaters.

"I go to these conferences -- the Independent Presenters Network, the League of American Theaters and Producers -- and my buddies there are saying how they're having great success with their 200-seat spaces," Lewis says. "Well, I was basically tuning that stuff out because I don't have that theater."

CMT's productions are staged in its 2,203-seat Wells Fargo Pavilion or are Broadway Sacramento presentations at the Community Center Theater.

But the numbers clicked in Lewis' head. The fact that one producer ran "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change" over four years and another ran "Forever Plaid" for 18 months to the profitable sound of \$1.2 million in revenue made him think again. Lewis also knew the city wanted to do something with the space at 10th and K, but tearing the building down and putting up something else from scratch was financially prohibitive and would have taken years.

"So I called up Tracy Michael with the city and said I had this really stupid idea: 'What if this space was a really classy Randy Paragary restaurant and inside was a 200-seat cabaret theater?' " Because the city has long wanted to transform the K Street area, Lewis' "stupid idea" gained traction, especially when developer David Taylor and restaurant maven Paragary came on board.

The city redevelopment agency, which owns the property, had previously sought ideas for the building, and the Taylor group had already submitted several options.

"The city asked us if we would consider putting in a black-box theater in our project," recalls Elle Warner, a Taylor Associates architect familiar with the project.

Lewis' idea made everyone happy, so the project has leapt forward.

"This is a venue Sacramento doesn't have," Lewis says. He also stresses that it will not be dinner theater, though some food will be available.

While the idea of "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change" in residence for a couple of years has certain numbing qualities, the space projects itself for other uses. Actual cabaret singers could work there, and CMT could present small-scale concert versions of certain niche musicals rather than full productions.

Lewis says it won't just be another nightclub.

"It's musical theater. That we know how to do," he says.

B Street busts out

Meanwhile, across town, the gleam in Buck Busfield's eye is sparked by an old medical office building. It's the site of the B Street Theatre's proposed complex at 27th Street and Capitol Avenue. The producing director of the popular midtown company hopes to produce theater there in 2010.

The site will hold two theaters. The first will be a 360-seat proscenium space with an orchestra pit below and a second tier above. That theater will be the dedicated home of B Street's family programming and will run other B Street shows in repertory when possible.

"The mission of Theater for Children is to serve a lot of people," Busfield says. "We're not looking for a niche audience; we want to throw a really wide net. A lot of kids and a lot of adults. Naturally, you need more venues and bigger ones."

Especially if you've reached the point where you have more subscribers than you have seats. The family series now runs in the 112-seat B2 space.

"We're maxed out where we are now, and the market's telling us they can tolerate more," Busfield says.

The building will also house a 250-seat thrust stage similar to the main 186-seat space that B Street operates now. This smaller space for adult-oriented material will also allow for more ambitious production elements.

The B Street Theatre complex is just a part of the redevelopment spurred by Sutter Medical Center's desire to renovate its midtown facilities. Also getting a makeover is Trinity Cathedral, across the street from where the B Street would call home. The theater complex costs a little over \$30 million, while the total project is now budgeted at more than \$456 million.

"We've been talking about this for about a decade, but it got real in 2003 when Sutter decided to develop the land," says Busfield.

Sutter Health is donating the land to the B Street, and the two groups expect to partner the B Street's family theater offerings with Sutter Health's pediatric healing arts programs.

The B Street has retained a cadre of consultants to circumspectly guide the theater through the complexities of fundraising and the enigmas of orchestrating public perceptions. The theater declined to release any images of its planned venues.

Unwilling to go into specifics, Busfield does vaguely hype the theater, saying it will take a "unique approach." The organization has been quietly fundraising for several years and has 70 percent of the project funded through pledges and other revenue streams, but still needs about \$10 million to finish it.

Bright lights, big city

Richard Rich has no problems going public with his plans. Rich, development director for Thomas Enterprises, the Atlanta-based organization that owns the intriguing 240 acres of railyard next to the Sacramento River, has many suitors. Rich has met with arts groups such as the Choral Society, California Musical Theatre, the Sacramento Philharmonic, Capital Stage and the Sacramento Ballet, assessing needs and desires for the proposed development there.

"What can't happen is to throw a bunch of venues into an existing pie, the current population, and expect anything good to happen out of it," Rich says.

He knows that different organizations have different needs and that several theaters in the complex would make sense.

"We're looking at four of varying sizes. Between 1,200 to 1,600 (seats) is the largest house, but this is all open to discussion right now," Rich says.

The dialogue has been going on for over a year, with the arts community lobbying Thomas Enterprises for the multiple venues as part of the new mixed-use development. Rich and many others believe that this is a crucial time for the Sacramento region to control its destiny.

"Sacramento's future as a first-tier city depends in part on its ability to provide a cultural critical mass for its residents," Rich says.

Rich also has in mind an ambitious educational component, a performing-arts academy that would have its home in the development. "It sets this project apart from anything we've considered before. There'll be a K-12 component -- we're not exactly sure how that gets structured yet -- and there'll be a bachelor of fine arts program."

Retail and residential components are also parts of the expansive project, which could potentially double the

size of downtown.

What Rich doesn't initially mention is a sports arena component to the project.

"If the support were there for it, we have places on site for it," he allows. "We're not actively lobbying for or against."

In the next breath, he adds, "We'd love to have an arena downtown, but it's not a focus of our initial planning. We're making allowances for it, though."

Rich says the theaters and other elements are the focus: "museums, restaurants, markets, things that make a community. An arena would be a great benefit, but it's not a key to making a downtown."

The vision thing

Just who will lead is the question everyone asks. There has been a vacuum dating back to 1972, when the Alhambra Theatre became a supermarket, through 2000, when a needed amphitheater was shuffled off to Marysville, 50 miles away.

Warren Smith, executive vice president of the West Sacramento-based River Cats and a veteran of last year's ill-fated campaign for Measures Q and R to build a railyard arena, knows that the community must be involved and informed about what's at stake.

"I think people want to be entertained in a downtown district, but I don't know that for sure," Smith says. "I think we need to have a good communitywide dialogue and see what comes to the top so we can prioritize. We only get so many bites at the apple. If we're going to do it, let's make sure it serves the community as a whole."

Studies and plans abound for regional performance venues. Along with the city's upcoming study of area venue needs, the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission recently surveyed arts groups and individuals on that and related topics.

The independent, nonprofit think tank Valley Vision also has a project called Partnership for Prosperity, with 34 economic development organizations collaborating on "A Business Plan for the Sacramento Region."

"There's strong common interest from these major economic development players in making our region's civic amenities -- parks, museums, performing-arts venues, sports and entertainment venues, cultural facilities and the like -- as robust as possible," says Jon Jeisel, Valley Vision's communications and projects manager.

Some complementary partnerships are already in place, such as the public-private Studios for the Performing Arts project, which includes four of the region's major arts groups: the Sacramento Ballet, California Musical Theatre, the Sacramento Opera and the Sacramento Philharmonic Orchestra.

On Wednesday, plans will be unveiled for the four-story, 47,000- square-foot structure that will house rehearsal and office space for the four groups as well as the ballet's Center for Dance Education. The proposed \$25 million facility should be available for occupation in fall 2009.

Last week, potential buyers of the Crest Theatre announced that they'd like to turn its three separate spaces into a "small Lincoln Center" performing arts complex in the center of the city. That kind of venture could buy the region time for something like the railyard project, which realistically is years away from even breaking ground.

"When you ask a room full of artistic people, 'What do you want?' you get a lot of answers," Rich says. "That's in today's market, not even thinking about where will the market grow in the next decade, because our focus really is 20 years out."

"We're building this piece of the city to be the part of Sacramento that it wants to be."

For more information:

www.BenArts.org

www.valleyvision.org

www.californiamusicaltheatre.com

www.deltaking.com/theatre.html

www.bstreettheatre.org

www.thomasent.com

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