

## THEATER

## SMELL OF THE GREASEPAINT, ROAR OF THE CROWD

*Curtain set to rise on University Theatre upgrades, expansion*

THE THIRD ACT IN THE UNIVERSITY OF Oregon's distinguished theater program opens fall 2008 with completion of the James F. Miller Theatre Complex. With dramatic flair, the University broke ground this spring on the \$7.8 million complex made possible through a \$1.5 million gift from the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation and matching funds from institutional, public, and private sources.

For 130 years, theater has played a significant role at the University of Oregon. In fact, it wasn't uncommon in the early days of theater for drama students to perform plays to help fund the struggling UO football team. In 1915, during construction of Johnson Hall, the campus administration building, the blueprints were altered to include a 200-seat theater—Guild Hall—on the main floor, reputed to be the first dedicated theater built on a college campus in the United States.

Still, Guild Hall wasn't without its challenges. There was no rehearsal room, and a steep, winding stairway from the Guild stage led down to two dark, windowless rooms that served as a green room and costume storage. When a set took up the entire stage, there was no crossover from one side to the other. Actors leaving stage right and entering a scene later stage left had to exit through a window, climb down a ladder, walk around the back of Johnson Hall, and come up the stairs through the pass door to enter the other side.

In the 1940s, the scene shop was located two blocks from the theater. A pot-bellied woodstove provided heat for drying the glue and paint used to construct the muslin and flax scenery frames. Because of gasoline rationing during the war, the scenery had to be hand carried to the theater, which often meant waiting for a break in the rain.

University Theatre director Horace Robinson, who joined the UO faculty in 1933, recognized the need for an improved facility. Despite a ban on constructing any new University buildings, he championed



John Bauguess

### TEMPORARY TIMEPIECE TOWERS OVER QUAD

At least for now, the Memorial Quadrangle between Knight Library and the Lillis Complex is home to a half-scale model of one of the most important timepieces in Western history. A group of scholars from architecture, physics, history, classics, astronomy, and the UO Libraries developed specifications for the ten-meter obelisk, or gnomon, based on the Solarium Augusti, the sundial set up in Rome by Augustus shortly after Julius Caesar's calendar reform. The shadow cast by the obelisk marks time by hour, day, month, and season. It also illustrates the rotation of the Earth on its axis and suggests how the Earth progresses in an elliptical orbit around the sun. Workers completed installation of the obelisk before the June 21 summer solstice. The model will remain in place at least through the December 22 winter solstice, allowing project organizers to track a full solar cycle and calibrate the "clock face" where the timekeeping shadow falls. The obelisk is a model of a proposed permanent structure that might be placed in one of several locations around campus should adequate private funds be raised for its completion.



Professor Emeritus Horace Robinson and four costumed thespians from the Department of Theater Arts all participated in the groundbreaking ceremony for the James F. Miller Theatre Complex. The facility, set to open in fall 2008, will upgrade and expand production and performance capabilities.

a clever though controversial proposal to categorize the new theater as a mere renovation of Villard Hall. The University's second act opened in 1949 with the 400-seat University Theatre—aptly renamed for Robinson following his retirement in 1975.

Although the Robinson Theatre was a huge improvement and has hosted more than 1,000 performances, fifty-eight years later the theater arts department has outgrown its backstage accommodations. The scene shop, located directly behind the Robinson stage, makes some rehearsals impossible due to the roar of earsplitting saws and power tools. A disorientating maze of doors, hallways, and stairs descend into Villard Hall's underbelly, the basement level where dye craft area, green room, and costume and scene shops compete for severely limited space. The pocket-sized dye room contains a washer and dryer, a dyeing vat, and a clothesline; a fan in the single window is the only source of ventilation. An adjacent room stacked from ceiling to floor with boxes doubles as a fitting room. "Everything is just stacked as high as it can be stacked," says John Schmor, associate professor of theater arts. "But we're good at using all available space."

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New theater design features a wall of windows.

When the curtain rises on the third act, however, the era of behind-the-scenes production in cramped quarters, unventilated rooms with low ceilings and clamorous steam pipes, sawdust, and performances that must struggle to overcome challenging lighting and acoustics will come to a close. The first major facilities expansion since 1949, the Miller Theatre Complex adds 18,205 square-feet of space and includes a new studio theater with sophisticated lighting and sound, a scene shop, a green room and costume shop, and a shared lobby connected to the Robinson Theatre. Using a contemporary “black box” design, the 150-seat studio theater will have no fixed stage or seating area, which allows it to be configured as needed for each individual performance. The theater will also feature a high-tech transparent tension grid. This tightly stretched grid of steel cables creates a taut “floor” high above the stage; technicians will be able to use it to access and safely adjust lighting and sound equipment. A major renovation to Robinson Theatre includes acoustical upgrades and raised stadium seating, which might eliminate a few seats, but will enhance the audience’s view of the stage.

University Planning associate Fred Tepfer, who has worked extensively on the project, says the new complex with its stunning “wall of windows” exterior should also make a big splash in the community. “It’s going to take us from being a ‘What’s that?’ to ‘Oh, wow! What’s that?’”

Likewise, first-year Ph.D. student James Engberg says there is a growing sense of excitement among the University’s theater arts students.

“I’m not sure how palpable it is right now, just because it still feels like a long way off, but there’s still sort of a general feeling that something good is coming.”

—SHARLEEN NELSON '06



  
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