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## Dream debut

Cal State Fullerton's new Performing Arts Center is the culmination of 15 years of effort.

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This weekend's official opening of the \$48.5 million Performing Arts Center at California State University, Fullerton, truly is - forgive the cliché - the culmination of a dream.

The 109,000-square-foot complex is particularly satisfying for Jerry Samuelson, dean of the College of the Arts, and Jay Bond, associate vice president of maintenance. Samuelson and Bond had shepherded the project for more than 15 years. It took that long, in part, because initial plans for a 1,200-seat theater were rejected as being too expensive.

But in a neat twist along the winding, rutted road to the arts center's completion, Samuelson and other CSU officials say they are grateful now that that theater was scuttled. Instead of the originally proposed single hall that would serve multiple purposes, Fullerton ended up with three theaters of different sizes specifically designed for dramatic, instrumental and choral performances. Overall, the new venues are much better suited to the college's needs, Samuelson said.

"We keep saying how lucky we are that we didn't get the first building built," the dean said in a recent phone interview. "So, what we all thought was the end of the world (when the first project failed), turned out to be a bright new beginning."

That "bright new beginning" represents a major step up for the College of the Arts and for Cal State Fullerton, which has 35,000 students - the biggest enrollment in the 23-university system. Performing-arts classes and concerts had been held in an inadequate number of 40-year-old rooms and auditoriums, some of which were technologically inferior.

Music students couldn't hear themselves play, for example, in the old building's Little Theater, said Marc Dickey, chairman of the music department. The new, 800-seat Vaughncille Joseph Meng Concert Hall has a "tunable" acoustic canopy. The additional classrooms in the new building allowed theater and dance department chairwoman Susan Hallman to schedule more sections for this upcoming semester.

Dance classes had been held in converted classrooms that got so steamy, the mirrors would fog up. The new dance studios have proper flooring, air conditioning and ceilings that are high enough for dancers to lift partners over their heads.

Samuelson noted that the department's dance accreditation had been threatened.

"The last accreditation visit, the team came out during one of our major dance performances," he said. "They were absolutely very complimentary to what they saw. But they thought we had awful facilities, and we had to promise them we were building great facilities or we would lose our accreditation."

In addition to the concert hall, the new Performing Arts Center includes the 250-seat, thrust-stage Young Theatre; the 150-seat black-box Hallberg Theatre; three dance studios, including one that can be converted into a performance space; a studio dedicated for musical theater rehearsals; costume shop and 6,000-square-foot scenic shop; a recording studio; warm-up and dressing rooms; and faculty offices and classrooms.

Student productions will take precedence in the new theaters, although the College of the Arts has invited the Pacific Symphony, Philharmonic Society of Orange County and other professional artists to perform for

the inaugural season.

Dickey said he has trouble finding words to describe how happy he is with the new center.

"Having a place to perform that matches up with the effort and talent of the students, and maybe matches up with their passion for music-making, is something we've never had."

#### Initial rejection

The saga for a new arts complex began when the board of trustees of the CSU system adopted a policy that every large campus should have a 1,200-seat multipurpose theater. Samuelson, Jay Bonds and a committee of arts faculty came up with an initial wish list for a new performing-arts building, and hired Los Angeles architects Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates to do initial designs in 1990. (The firm has since split up, with Pfeiffer Partners carrying on the project.)

Fullerton's proposal was working its way up the ladder for approval when disaster struck. The chancellor's office turned down the initial design because it was going to cost too much.

Samuelson, however, refused to give up. He began thinking of less expensive ways to realize the project that would also be more useful for students. He hit upon the smaller multi-theater approach that would have a combined seating of just over 1,200 seats and pitched that to the chancellor's office.

It got the go-ahead, with the legislature and governor giving final approval in 2002. The state eventually kicked in \$43 million for construction (from a bond issue); the university raised \$5 million from private sources, the largest gift being close to \$2 million from Vaughncille Joseph Meng.

Architect Bill Murray, who has been on the project from the beginning, said the new direction was a smarter choice for Fullerton. With one hall, the college's department heads would have been constantly jockeying for stage time; that should not be an issue with three theaters of different configurations.

Plus, the new spaces were designed to deliver not only a professional performing experience, but to fulfill an educational purpose, too, he said. The concert hall, for example, has seating behind the orchestra, which will enable students to sit closer to the musicians.

"The concert hall and the black-box theater, in particular, are all high-end teaching spaces," Murray said. "They were designed as great teaching spaces."

Added music department chairman Dickey: "Everything that takes place will be in a room that was designed just for that genre."

Classes resume the end of January, but theater graduate student Katy Streeter has already started learning how to operate the new lighting equipment. A master's of fine arts student in lighting design, Streeter, 23, said Cal State Fullerton is now the only university in the area to have this top-of-the-line technology.

"It's an amazing experience, and you can't get this education anywhere else. And when you go out in the workforce you're going to be so much more competitive," said Streeter, who said it's fun figuring out how everything works. "It's what the industry is going toward, so it's invaluable. Other schools have the technology but not the amount that we have."

#### **A West-side anchor**

University officials said the new Performing Arts Center will become an anchor for the whole western side of the campus, adjacent to State College Boulevard. A road that used to separate the visual arts building from the rest of the campus has been turned into a welcoming plaza in front of the Performing Arts Center. For the first time, the visual and performing-arts buildings, built in 1969 and 1964, respectively, will be tied together and to the rest of the campus.

The old, three-story performing-arts building, which has three theaters, classrooms, practice rooms and offices, will still be fully utilized, thanks to soaring enrollment. There are plans for improvements for some of

its inadequate rooms.

Architect Murray said he wanted the Performing Arts Center to set a new direction for the campus. To that end, he used materials of greater diversity than in the other structures around campus. Murray and his team selected natural materials: glass made from sand, concrete, wood and Rheinzink (a German-made material) for the angular, peaked roof. The architects also used Rheinzink for the Colburn School of Music in downtown Los Angeles.

"I think the building contextually fits in well with the campus. It's not like we've gone off and done something completely unlike anything else on campus. We've been mindful of the campus," he said.

A large central lobby leads to all three theaters, and a main staircase leads to the upstairs studios and other rooms. There are passageways from the new building into the old one. Murray laid out the building so sets and materials could be moved easily among theaters: "If you can't load in and out, you've pretty much doomed your facility."

Theater and dance department chairwoman Hallman said the architects listened carefully to what the faculty said they needed. As a result, the new center not only functions well, but it's also "comfortable."

"We were really very blessed with the architects. They didn't superimpose their idea of what the complex should be," Hallman said. "I've gone into a lot of places that fell cold or just don't function well. (This one) not only has a nice functionality to it, I feel the space has an energy to itself, and it's kind of catching."

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