

Curtain about to rise at Santa Monica College's new performing arts center

Thanks to a decade of planning, \$45 million in fundraising and high-profile backers such as Dustin Hoffman and Eli Broad, the long-awaited arts and education facility will debut at a gala Saturday.

By Martha Groves
September 19, 2008

Sisyphus had it easy. Or so it often seemed to the individuals who spent the last decade bringing to fruition Santa Monica College's new performing arts center.

The king of Corinth was merely doomed to forever push a boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll back down each time he reached the summit. He didn't also have to deal with fundraising amid a topsy-turvy economy and soaring prices for concrete and steel.

Ten years and \$45 million after the idea for a world-class arts and education center was conceived, the space will officially open with a gala Saturday, featuring a performance by Broadway legend Barbara Cook.

For culture-craving Westsiders, the striking modernist center -- designed by Santa Monica architect Renzo Zecchetto in wood, glass, steel and stone -- represents a new locus for what artistic director Dale Franzen says will be first-rate dance, opera, theater and music, including new and unexpected collaborations.

In addition to classrooms and galleries, the complex features the 499-seat Broad Stage, which has the latest in acoustics and lighting, and the Edye Second Space, a 99-seat "black box" theater intended to serve as a laboratory for "mad talent and creative experiment," according to a promotional brochure.

The theaters were named for Los Angeles philanthropists Eli and Edythe Broad, who last March supplied a \$10-million endowment for programming and arts education.

Dustin Hoffman, an early supporter and Santa Monica College dropout who credits a theater class there with sparking his acting career, calls the complex a great achievement that the college hopes will serve as a cultural haven for decades to come.

"The goal is to live up to the responsibility of what exists there, what has been put there by the

community, the patrons and Renzo," Hoffman, chairman of the Broad Stage's artistic advisory board, said in an interview from New York.

The ambitious effort came close to stumbling many times.

The idea was hatched 10 years ago in the ramshackle auditorium of the former Madison Elementary School on 11th Street at Santa Monica Boulevard, which Santa Monica College was leasing as a satellite campus. The 1994 Northridge earthquake had seriously damaged the structure, and the state had offered some money for repairs.

Piedad Robertson, then the college's president, ventured into the auditorium with Franzen, a former professional opera singer who had taught in the college's music department. Franzen walked onto the stage and began singing, her light lyric soprano filling the room.

Robertson suggested that they think bigger than mere repairs. "What do we need, and what does this community need?" she recalls asking Franzen, who agreed to work on a plan for a versatile performance space.

Franzen began seeking advice from about 100 artists, arts patrons and culturally minded Westsiders. Among them were the director of the UCLA Center for the Performing Arts, who talked about programming for Royce Hall, and the man in charge of the arts program at California Plaza in downtown Los Angeles.

"I started to map out a preliminary sense of multipurpose programming" for a theater in an educational facility, Franzen said in an interview at the Broad Stage this week.

A gift from the late Roma Cockins, a Santa Monica resident whose father had designed the Madison school, funded the hiring of Zecchetto to create a design and a model. The model, which Franzen carted to parties all over the Westside, prompted private donors to kick in \$5 million.

With the approval of the college's board of trustees, Franzen continued to raise money. Next came a required environmental review, which, Franzen said, "was fairly grueling and went on for 18 months." The Division of the State Architect, which oversees the design and construction of elementary, middle and high schools and community colleges, next gave its approval.

By then, a global shortage of steel and concrete, caused in large part by the building boom in China, dramatically upped the ante.

"That was a big blow," Franzen said.

What had been envisioned as a project costing \$18 million to \$22 million suddenly soared to \$30

million to \$40 million, well beyond what supporters felt they could raise privately. Robertson suggested that the college use a portion of the funds from a \$135-million bond measure that was up for a vote in 2004 in Santa Monica and Malibu.

It passed, and soon after Robertson retired. An interim president took over, causing uncertainty for Franzen, Zecchetto and Hoffman.

Construction began in January 2005. A year later, Chui L. Tsang took over as president of the college and, to Franzen's great relief, quickly threw his support behind the project.

Much of the former Madison school is now used as college classrooms and practice rooms. The once decrepit auditorium where Robertson and Franzen first began formulating their idea is now the Edye Second Space. The project, which Franzen said took months longer than expected, added more than 30,000 square feet of new space, bringing the complex total to 70,650 square feet.

The Broad Stage, the complex's centerpiece, features curvaceous shapes composed of colored plaster or renewable Honduran mahogany, designed to enhance the facility's acoustics. Every seat has a clear view of the stage, creating an appealing intimacy. "This building was conceived from the inside out," after much discussion about how the space would be used and what it should offer the community, Zecchetto said.

With the opening in sight and performances by mezzosoprano Frederica von Stade, singer Jubilant Sykes and the Lula Washington Dance Theater, among others, planned through next May, Franzen says the many delays, frustrations and "dark moments" have started to recede.

"We're thinking big, and we live in a city that deserves that," she said, adding: "We have a lot more fundraising to do. . . . Sustaining our vision is the next big goal."