

Stage Center Opens to Mixed Reviews

Written by Jack Money

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Nothing has come easy for Stage Center or for its supporters, it seems.

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Forty years ago, though, optimism blossomed as local headlines announced that internationally-renowned director and actress Margaret Webster would direct the planned inaugural play in the building, "A Man for All Seasons." (1)

Stage Center was known then as Mummers Theater. And getting a permanent, landmark location to perform plays in Oklahoma City had been a dream of actors, actresses, directors and audiences for years leading up to that inaugural season.

The theater had started with outside tent performances in the late 1940s, and since had moved into a warehouse on West Main. But organizers were looking for something more permanent.

The key to getting that going happened in 1962 when the Ford Foundation made

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a \$1.25 million grant to the Mummers Theater.

But the grant came with a big string attached.

The money only would be awarded to the organization, the foundation

determined, if locals could raise another \$750,000 as a match.

That goal was achieved by a capital fundraising drive in June 1963. Once the

fundraising goal was achieved, Mack Scism, managing director of the theater,

told reporters about contacting four different New York consultants to explore

potential designs for the new place to perform.

Scism already knew what he wanted in a new theater – a main performance hall

featuring an open stage, with audience seating on three sides.

Preliminary plans also called for a smaller theater capable of seating an

audience about half the size as its larger counterpart. (2)

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By 1967, Scism and other theater officials had selected a downtown location

for their project, a three-acre site bordered by Sheridan, Hudson, California

and Walker held by the Oklahoma City Urban Renewal Authority.

While a story revealing those details noted that a purchase price for the

land had not been published, it also conjectured that officials expected that

Urban Renewal only would seek a price of about \$200,000 for the land. (3)

John Johansen and Associates of New Canaan, Conn., had been selected to

design the project – and Scism liked what was planned.

The building, he said, would be “sculptural in form using concrete as the

basic material. You will walk under, through and around these buildings,’ Scism

said.

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Once the project was getting built, however, people like one woman who got

her first glimpse of it from the bus station across the street were not as

impressed.

“Why in God’s name would a planning commission OK such a thing in the midst

of moder construction?” asked the woman in a letter to the editor of The

Oklahoman. (4)

Its design, for those who are unfamiliar, set it up as a three-part, or three

armed building. The biggest of the three parts contained a 592-seat “Space

Stage” theater, built in the three-quarter round, meaning it was flat only on

one side.

The “middle” segment of the building contained the “Little Theater,” capable

of seating 240 to watch experimental and less orthodox plays.

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The smallest segment contained business, administration and ticket offices,

along with a 2nd floor children's acting school and round rehearsal stage.

Below ground, the building design included space for dressing, scene,

wardrobe and prop rooms.

Each of the building's three parts is connected by walkways, while tubes and

pipes above and below conveyed water, steam, air and electricity to each of the

parts. Heating and air conditioning units are set in box-like crows' nests high

atop concrete pillars, keeping them out of the way but making them conspicuously

visible, as well.

One Oklahoman article noted that locals had various descriptions for the

building, calling it a hatbox, a pipe dream, and more imaginative – and

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unprintable descriptions, an article about the project reported.

However, the writer also noted, the theater – preparing to open within weeks

for its inaugural season – also ought to have been able to win “an Oscar as the

scene-stealing superstar of the downtown construction show” known as Urban

Renewal.

“It has raised more eyebrows and dropped more jaws than a bowlegged grandma

in a miniskirt,” the author noted.

Scism, director and producer for the theater, summed up its design by calling

it a “jungle gym for adults.”

He went on to call the building “the most advanced and fluid theatre in the

world today.”

And, once the theater opened, Scism told an AP drama critic who toured the

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project in early 1971 that “once we get the scoffers inside, their opinion changes.”

“It certainly is better than looking like a post office or funeral parlor.

“We wanted a theater that didn’t have to fight its environment in order to

get a play on, and we didn’t worry about the patina. Like, who worries about

Barbara Streisand’s nose?” Scism asked. (5)

Two years later, though, Scism and the Mummens Theater had to close the

building’s doors. Season subscriptions hadn’t been going as well as hoped, and

about \$180,000 in pledges made initially as part of the capital campaign to

match the Ford Foundation’s grant to build and operate the building never had

been collected.

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Still, Scism expressed pride at what had been accomplished, noting that a

building like the one that had been built was a chance for him and his company

that only came along once in a lifetime.

“For Oklahoma City, it was ... The only chance we would have had to build such

a theater for the next 50 years,” Scism told columnist Jon Denton of The

Oklahoman. (6)

“Whatever we built had to remain usable beyond the year 2000. I think it

would have been a great exhibition of shortsightedness to build a building just

for the moment.”

When asked what he thought should be done with the building, Scism replied

that “You can’t do one thing with it except build a theater company. If it isn’t

a theater, it will just have to be torn down.

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“That’s rather like tearing down the Paris Opera House. It’s going to be a

famous building ... it IS a famous building, a landmark structure and an advanced

structure, particularly for Oklahoma City,” he said.

Fortunately for Scism and the building’s backers, community philanthropist

John E. Kirkpatrick stepped onto the stage.

“We have a plan,” Kirkpatrick told a reporter, when referring to the

building’s potential future. “It still has to be accepted by the people who can

make it work, and by the city and the community. The community has to embrace

the plan and get behind it. Unless such a plan is supported, there’s no use in

going ahead.” (7)

His plan, Kirkpatrick explained, would be to form a community theater. This

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new community theater would be operated similarly to one created in Dallas where

the local arts organization would pitch in money to help keep the operation

going, where volunteers would help out to cut costs to operate the building, and

the local city government would step in to help pay for landscaping and utility

costs. Tentatively, Kirkpatrick said the building would be renamed the Oklahoma

Theatre Center at Mummers Theatre.

His plan worked. The Kirkpatrick Foundation paid the outstanding theater

center mortgage of about \$230,000, and provided an additional \$100,000 to help

pay for needed improvements to the building. The community bought in as well,

and a new slate of shows were scheduled for the building starting in October

1972.

The following year, the Oklahoma Theater Center hired Russell Walton as its

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business manager and publicity director, and in May 1974, theater director Lyle

Dye noted the operation ended its performances that year with money still in the

bank.

“But just because we made a couple of thousand doesn’t mean we are affluent,”

Dye warned. (8)

In 1978, the Oklahoma Theater Center was attracting its largest audiences

ever, but theater officials were saying they still believed much of the

community didn’t realize the center still was open and operating.

In 1984, a fundraising event for the center sold out, leaving Kirkpatrick and

others thankful they had stepped in a dozen years earlier to save the building

from closing after Mummers Theatre had failed.

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“The theater is basic to Oklahoma City,” Kirkpatrick noted at the time. “If

it was allowed to go broke, it would be a black mark against the development of

that entire area,” he said. (9)

By 1985, the center had yet another name – Stage Center – and made the

headlines early that year when its designer, John M. Johansen, visited the

location for the first time since its opening.

“The Mummers is 14 years old now and is known in every country in the world,”

noted Johansen, who had won the highest award the American Institute of

Architects confers for its design.

Johansen told a reporter then that the building was one of the major

buildings of his career.

“And it is the best,” he declared. (10)

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Also in 1985, the center hired a public relations head to help out with what

managers at the time called a period of “accelerated growth.”

But just as it looked as if the center’s worries were over, the oil bust hit,

causing subscription sales and single ticket sales for the theater to begin

falling off.

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In January 1986, James Tolbert, president of the center's board, announced that four plays scheduled for the center would have to be cancelled, and that seven members of the center's staff had to be let go. (11)

Tolbert tried to put a positive spin on the decision.

"If you look around at our own performances, the level of interest and the

age of the audience is very encouraging, but the economic conditions aren't," he

said, also noting that about half of the available tickets had been sold for

previous theater performances that year.

"Both of those things say to us 'You better not get any further into debt.

You better use the resources and the talents that you have to get out of debt so

that the organization can survive and prosper."

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Prudent plans? Yes. But unsuccessful, unfortunately. Stage Center closed in

August, 1986 with \$90,000 of debt.

Still, though, community arts lovers refused to let the center die. In 1987,

the Arts Council of Oklahoma City voted to approve buying the property for an

undisclosed price from the Kirkpatrick Foundation.

As part of that agreement, the Arts Council also had to commit to raising

money to make needed improvements to the property.

In 1988, Jackie Jones, director of the Arts Council, outlined improvements

that were planned for the building, including adding an elevator, a covered

walkway and replacing vital equipment.

Arts council officials also noted they would opt to manage the building

differently than it had been done in the past.

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“There are primary differences in the way we are approaching things,” a

council spokesman said. “The theater has always been used as a home base for a

single agency. From the studies we have done, we don’t feel like any one agency

can sustain that building.

“It has now broken the back of several (arts agencies); so now to manage it

right, we have to have a variety of companies, and keep it very busy,” the

spokesman said. (12)

While internal improvements were planned, the spokesman added that no real

changes were planned to make the unique building blend in more with its

surrounding environment.

“We really believe that this is a special piece of architecture, and we want

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to leave it as it is, as much as possible to preserve it. We really see it as

kind of like a puppy that is so ugly, it can be cute. If you can get inside and

enjoy it, we really believe you can get used to its outside,” the spokesman

said.

But getting the building reopened proved to be more daunting than what

supporters had hoped. By the end of 1991, the center remained closed, and it

would take nearly another two years before it would be open and operating again

with the Arts Council of Oklahoma City as its landlord.

That arrangement continued until about four years ago, when the City of

Oklahoma City was asked to step in and operate and maintain the building by the

arts council. Council members agreed to a deal expected to last through early

2011.

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Ward 6 Councilwoman Ann Simank said then the city needed to help out to keep

the unique structure from closing once again.

“The last thing our city needs is another empty building,” Simank said. (13)

But will city leaders stay the course, now that the building is closed once

again?

Heavy June rains this year poured more than 5 feet of water into the

building’s subterranean offices, rehearsal spaces and prop and costume shops.

The Arts Council of Oklahoma City, Artworks, Carpenter Square Theatre,

Metropolitan School of Dance, the Oklahoma Community Theatre Association and

Oklahoma Shakespeare in the Park were forced out of the building by damages the

water caused.

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Allied Arts President Deborah McAuliffe Senner told a reporter then the

building could be closed for at least six months.

Here's hoping the community comes together at least one more time to save

this unique jewel that is part of Oklahoma City's downtown landscape.

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