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A Bold New Stage For D.C.

Harman Hall Will Transform The Shakespeare Theatre's Reach -- and Its Vision

By Peter Marks
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Like many a discerning house-hunter, Michael Kahn had a detailed wish list for the real estate he desired as the next downtown showplace for the Shakespeare Theatre Company.

"I wanted the stage to be transformable," he says, "so that we would have a whole new and very exciting way of thinking about our repertory. I wanted the theater to be welcoming -- even without a lot of scenery. And I wanted the acoustics to be perfect."

Kahn, the Shakespeare's longtime artistic director, believes he's gotten what he bargained for. The \$89 million theater that the company is completing on F Street NW -- across from Verizon Center and a virtual stone's throw from its existing space on Seventh Street -- is poised to become not only an elegant focal point of the company's vigorous expansion but also the glittery anchor for the astonishing architectural renaissance that Washington theater has experienced the past few years.

Without question, the opening next month of Sidney Harman Hall -- named for the industrialist who is putting up nearly one-fourth of the project's cost -- is a cornerstone cultural happening of the fall.

Designed by Toronto architect Jack Diamond, the 775-seat theater, with its soaring glass facade and dark interior walls of African cherry, heralds a new era for Kahn's company, one that occasions great possibilities -- but one that is also not without big risks.

The significance of the moment is not lost on the theater's patrons. The Oct. 1 gala to unveil the space, and starring, among others, Patti LuPone, Wynton Marsalis and Anne-Sophie Mutter, sold out even before the invitations went out. Harman says that he himself has had to field anxious e-mails from miffed supporters scavenging for tickets, which start at \$5,000 a head. (Tables go for as much as \$100,000.)

What that indicates, of course, is the exceedingly good vibe the company has managed to generate in Washington, a city eager to firm up its own place at the table of culture. As if to underline the notion that "Macbeth" or "The Winter's Tale" has at least as relevant a claim to civic life as the Wizards or the Capitals, the city itself has ponied up \$20 million for the new theater.

"It's what a great theater should be, a building that is worthy of the quality of the plays we produce," says Nicholas Goldsborough, the company's managing director.

In a busy sequence that began with Round House Theatre's new playhouse and Studio Theatre's expansion to four performance spaces, that progressed with the opening of handsome new theaters for Woolly Mammoth, Olney Theatre Center and Signature Theatre -- and is to continue with the planned

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renovation of Arena Stage's campus -- the Shakespeare Theatre project still stands apart. That's because the opening of Sidney Harman Hall, the centerpiece of a new, 11-story union headquarters, has set the stage for a major rethink of the company's mission. Born more than two decades ago strictly as a producer of classical plays, the Shakespeare is metamorphosing into a multipurpose performing arts organization.

In this latest phase, Shakespeare Theatre is part of the newly created Harman Center for the Arts, an umbrella enterprise that is booking dance troupes, musical ensembles, touring plays -- even wedding receptions -- into both Sidney Harman Hall and Shakespeare's existing space on Seventh, the 451-seat Lansburgh, whenever Kahn's theater company isn't using them.

This season, a total of 200 non-Shakespeare Theatre performances have been booked into the spaces, says K Williams, the troupe's first booking manager. The Washington Ballet, CityDance Ensemble, Ford's Theatre and the touring Reduced Shakespeare Company are among those in the initial wave.

That is in addition to the eight major classical plays that the Shakespeare will stage in the two theaters during the 2007-08 season -- a net increase of three productions per year.

The flexibility of the new space -- as per Kahn's vision, Diamond's design allows the stage of Harman Hall to be swiftly reconfigured between a matinee and an evening performance -- also means that for the first time, Shakespeare Theatre will concurrently offer more than one play, and as many as three. This fall, Harman Hall will house a revolving pair of plays by Christopher Marlowe, that contemporary of Shakespeare, while the Lansburgh is featuring "The Taming of the Shrew."

If all that sounds like a difficult lift, it is. Kahn -- whose production of Marlowe's "Tamburlaine" will inaugurate Harman Hall on the last weekend in October, in tandem with Gale Edwards's staging of "Edward II" -- himself marvels at the magnitude of the challenge. He has the look these days of a father expecting quints.

"Starting next Tuesday, we're employing 65 actors," he explains as he sits in his administrative offices on Capitol Hill, his expression communicating both pride and trepidation at the prospect of an acting roster more than twice what the company is accustomed to. Extra rehearsal rooms, additional quarters for performers from out of town: The scale of almost everything is expanding. The company's budget of \$19 million is almost double what it was five years ago.

"We're going to just learn a lot," Kahn says. "I still can't find my way in some parts of the new building."

With more seats comes the pressure to fill them. The company has said that its strategy will be to intensify its efforts to draw more spectators from beyond the metropolitan area, although if that is going to happen, familiar patterns will have to shift; those who go to the theater in the nation's capital tend to be people within commuting range of their own homes. Time will tell whether an audience for the classics exists to sustain the increase in offerings; while the Shakespeare is seeing an uptick in new subscriptions this year, this phenomenon is common to established troupes in their first year in a new space.

Still, as Goldsborough explains, the rising costs of putting on high-caliber Shakespeare required the company to find a way to increase its earning power. The conclusion was reached, he says, that the smallish Lansburgh alone "would not be able to support the enterprise" for much longer.

That belief gave rise to the plans for the big new theater on F Street, as well as to the broadening of the

company's mission. The participation of Harman, founder of Harman International, a leading manufacturer of high-fidelity sound equipment -- and husband of Rep. Jane Harman (D-Calif.) -- proved to be key. A longtime supporter and member of the Shakespeare board, he became deeply attached to the proposed theater after learning Kahn shared his more comprehensive vision of the theater company.

"We were ready for it, if they were moving beyond mere seats to a larger role," Harman says of the \$20 million commitment he ultimately made to the project. "To encourage serious new work in all the performing arts, and thus create a center for performing arts, with the Shakespeare company as first among equals."

For the moment, though, it is the artistic promise of the new physical surroundings that has people excited. "Michael said, 'I want a Shakespeare theater for the 21st century,'" says Diamond, whose commissions have included Toronto's highly regarded new Opera House. A balance was sought between the potential warmth of a space and the gravity of what went on in it. "Michael said, 'I want it to be a strong space, but I don't want it to be overwhelming.'"

Occupying the first five floors of a new office building that houses the International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers, Harman Hall makes no effort to conceal what's inside: The facade, three stories of glass, juts out over the sidewalk, as if it were an immense see-through marquee. From the street, you look all the way through the multistory lobby to the orange-sherbet-colored exterior wall of the auditorium itself.

The most distinctive visual elements inside the auditorium are the walls. They're covered in what look like louvered panels, but the dark slats are actually part of the acoustic design. Behind these panels, made up of pieces of African wood called makore, are retractable velour curtains, and behind them are grooved concrete walls. Jennifer Mallard, a member of the architectural team, says the curtains can be lowered to satisfy the acoustic demands of concerts and other musical presentations.

The flexibility of the theater has to do with an extraordinary number of moving parts: The first several rows of seating are on wagons that either can be lowered into the floor or swung around at right angles to the auditorium, to create what is known as a thrust stage. An arcade around the stage can be used for actors or for additional seating. The proscenium that traditionally arches over the stage in this case is assembled in parts that can fly into the ceiling, allowing for a completely open performance space.

Diamond says the notion here was not to use the sort of complex mechanisms that would prove daunting to those responsible for operating the space day to day.

"Many theaters that try to be flexible have complicated machinery that doesn't get used," he adds. "I said, 'Why don't we use stagecraft as our technology?' That's why we can fly the proscenium and the pit lift will raise the wagons. All of it is done with what is extant in what theaters use."

Now, as construction workers finish installing Jerusalem limestone in the lobbies and flat-screen TVs in the Donors Lounge, Kahn is eager to find out how resonantly the words of long-dead playwrights can be projected in this familiar yet unfamiliar new environment.

"It's a little overwhelming; it's tremendously exciting," he says. "This is a whole new way of way of thinking about our repertory. And I want the audience to see all of the possibilities."

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