



The Argonaut

Theater group prevails in battle to make Edgemar a center for the arts

BY RAHNE PISTOR

Efforts have been in play since 1997 to turn the Edgemar building in Santa Monica into a center for the arts. But after the failure of one group, it took a group with major celebrity ties to raise the funding necessary for the facility to open its doors.

Edgemar Center for the Performing Arts founders Michelle Danner and Larry Moss have been acting teachers and theater directors, working with stars such as Penelope Cruz and Christian Slater. Through their Hollywood ties, they've been able to assemble a cast of donors and an honorary committee that includes names like Steven Spielberg, Kate Capshaw and Neil Simon.

And Edgemar will attempt to use star power to draw people to its opening event, a photography exhibition. The exhibit, titled *In a Different Light*, will feature "intimate, candid" photos of stars shot by Michael Tighe, and will mark the official opening of Edgemar Center for the Performing Arts at 7 p.m. Friday, July 18th, at 2437 Main St., Santa Monica.

Celebrities Tighe has photographed include Julia Roberts, Sean Penn, Martin Scorsese, Sandra Bullock, Christopher Walken, Joel Schumacher, Gloria Swanson, Faye Dunaway, Jackie Gleason, Helen Hunt, Robert Altman, Oliver Stone, Jack Nicholson, Danny DeVito and Jody Foster.

Tighe's photography first gained national recognition with his work published in *Interview* magazine. His dark, shadowy portraits were a contrast to the then-popular *Avedon*-style magazine photography. While maintaining a 15-year relationship with *Interview*, Tighe also shot for *New York* and *Vogue*.

Edgemar is a nonprofit organization which will produce performances of its in-house

theater company, the Creative Theater Group, and will also bring in outside artists.

"We'd like to have a little bit of everything. Our vision is to be truly a cultural arts center and have all arts under one roof," says Danner, who is executive artistic director.

The criteria, however, are less open-ended for musicians.

"I don't think we'll have rock bands or anything like that," says Danner. "We'd probably get noise complaints from the neighbors. Mostly just jazz and classical."

Its first performing arts series, called Kaleidoscope, will feature a five-week run of combined evenings of theater, music, art and film.

Upcoming plans include hosting a tribute festival to playwright Tennessee Williams and an independent film festival, says Danner.

The group raised the money to open the arts center at Edgemar through a series of performance benefits in which Danner recruited help from her movie business friends. A benefit scheduled for Saturday, September 13th, will be hosted by Steven Spielberg.

Spielberg also made a \$500,000 donation in exchange for the opportunity to name one of the theaters. Edgemar has a 65-seat theater and a 99-seat theater.

They are currently looking for a benefactor with a similar bid to name the 99-seat theater.

An advantage to theaters with less than 99 seats is that they may use Screen Actors Guild actors at less than the union rate. This will allow Edgemar to invite celebrities and special guests to take part in small-scale performances.

Edgemar, which retains its name from the days it was the Edgemar Farms dairy processing facility, was purchased in 1984 by Abby Sher.

"I knew when I bought it that I wanted it to house some kind of arts facility," says Sher. But this proved no smooth task. The building was renovated by the end of 1988. Shortly after, it became the home to the Santa Monica Museum of Art, says Sher.

The museum moved in 1997, joining the mass of art galleries at Bergamot Station on Michigan Avenue.

Before Danner and Creative Theater Group came on the scene, a deal was in the works with Loretta Theater group to make the property into an arts center. After almost two years of a lengthy public process, Loretta Theater quietly abandoned the project just weeks before building permits were issued.

The group went through a number of lengthy public hearings, at which neighbors complained that a theater complex would increase noise and traffic in the area.

Sher described the group as "uncommunicative" as to why it dropped plans for the arts center in 1999.

In 2000, after hearing the space was available, Creative Theater Group picked up where Loretta left off.

"It's always been a dream of mine to have an arts center," says Danner. "I started looking in the place with a flashlight when it was abandoned. I felt an electrical jolt in my gut. I imagined sound and applause, I saw lights. I knew that live art needed to be here."

Tickets to live performances will be from \$20 to \$30.

The theater has a full-time staff of about four people and is currently looking for volunteers, says Danner.