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"A tale of two theaters; Pasadena's Boston Court and Santa Monica's Edgemar Center share similar visions with dissimilar bankrolls"

By Hugh Hart, Special to the Times

Behold the new math of 99-seat theater: Three seasoned stage directors, one eccentric millionaire and two acting coaches have produced a pair of new venues, skewering in the process any notion that cutting-edge performance necessarily equals funky little storefront theaters.

In Pasadena, late-blooming philanthropist Z. Clark Branson spent \$5 million of his own money to build the 11,500-square-foot Boston Court Theater, and then hired Ovation Award-winning directors Jessica Kubzansky and Michael Michetti to provide artistic direction.

In Santa Monica, acting coach Larry Moss and his partner Michelle Danner raised \$1.5 million from donors including Steven Spielberg, Kate Capshaw, Tom Hanks and Neil Simon, to transform a 6,350-square-foot concrete shell into the Edgemar Center for the Arts.

Both are anchored by 99-seat black box theaters, both have additional 60-seat second stages, both have gleaming lobbies decorated by original art, plenty of parking and an astounding number of stalls in the restrooms.

If the next chapter in this tale of two theaters unfolds as planned, daring new work by gutsy young playwrights will be staged in the kind of posh environments usually reserved for safe entertainments. Will audiences respond? It's too soon to tell, but this much is clear: The artists at Boston Court and Edgemar are more than eager to try out their experiments in grit-and-polish theatricality.

A long road

Across town at the Edgemar Center for the Arts, Michelle Danner is ensconced in her second-floor office, where she reigns as the center's harried, unsalaried executive artistic director.

When she's not teaching, directing, or raising her year-old son, Danner has spent most of her time schmoozing, twisting arms, cheerleading, networking, negotiating and otherwise doing everything she can to get Edgemar off the ground.

Quite frankly, she says, it's been exhausting. "At some point, two years into the process, people started saying, 'What's happening with this arts center?' And I'd say, 'When was the last time you built an arts center? Show me yours. Give me the tips on how to do it, because it's not easy.' Along the way we've met some great people who've helped, but..." Danner pauses and closes her eyes wearily. "It's one of the hardest things I've ever done."

A former concert promoter who moved from New York in 1990 to teach acting with Moss at his Third Street Promenade studio, Danner had long envisioned a performance venue that presented music, dance, film and theater at night while providing arts programming for children during the day. In 1999, a friend helped Danner sneak into a vacant wing of the Edgemar retail complex on Santa Monica's Main Street.

"I walked in and looked around with this flashlight and had one of those turning-point moments. I literally felt a jolt of electricity, I saw light, I heard sound and I said, 'It's going to happen, we're going to be here. This is the space.'"

The structure certainly boasted impeccable architectural DNA. Frank Gehry had designed the Edgemar retail complex in 1989. But four years ago, the bare concrete husk, originally occupied until 1996 by the Santa Monica Art Museum, had no plumbing fixtures. It would take a massive infusion of cash to install bathrooms, tear down old partition walls, rewire the electrical system and reconfigure to the layout to create a fully functioning arts complex.

That meant it was time to call in favors. Capshaw, who had studied with Moss years ago in New York City, was intrigued by the kid-friendly aspect of the center's mission, so she and husband Spielberg got the ball rolling with a half-million-dollar donation.

Another Moss protégé, Jason Alexander, chipped in. Patricia Heaton and her husband, producer David Hunt Jones, contributed enough money to have the dressing rooms named after them. And when, after several false starts, the center threw a grand opening party in September, the guest list included Helen Hunt, Don Cheadle, Sally Field, Julia Ormond, William H. Macy, Dylan McDermott, Paul Reiser, Garry Shandling and Christian Slater. Edgemar's celebrity cachet has created a somewhat misleading im-

pression, says Deborah LaVine, the center's director of creative affairs. "One of our problems is perception," she says. "Our capital campaign was largely successful due to the generosity of big names, so when you put them on our donor wall it looks like we're flush and fully supported. And we're not. We're in that same boat with everybody else who's scrambling and trying to be clever about fund-raising."

Edgemar aims to announce a five-play inaugural season early next year. LaVine, an Ovation Award-winning veteran of L.A.'s small theater circuit who's worked with the Road Theatre, Deaf West Theatre and Odyssey Theatre Ensemble, said the center's mainstage slate will mix classics, experimental work and world premieres, citing the Actors Theatre in Louisville as a model.

Some projects, like a recent staged reading of Wendy McLeod's "The House of Yes," have evolved out of Moss and Danner's acting classes, which are now held at the center. Also on tap: a festival devoted to the works of Tennessee Williams and more children's programs to expand on the center's current afterschool partnerships with L.A.'s Best, Upward Bound and the YWCA.

All that ambition carries a price tag. Danner and company can only hope they painted the black wall of their black-box space the right color. Before she meets in the lobby with one of her acting students, Danner offers a quick tour of the center's black box theater, designed by Dason Whitsett. That back wall is actually painted deep red.

What's that about?

"We had a feng shui team come in," Danner explains. "They said, 'OK, this is our conclusion: You guys are swimming in creativity, but not in dough. What you have to do is paint the back wall of the theater red so that you attract funds.' So that's the story."