



## **The Surf Santa Monica Curtain to Finally Rise on New Arts Center**

BY ERICA WILLIAMS

April 16 -- "Swimming in creativity." That was the assessment of the Feng Shui consultant who visited the new home of the Edgemar Center for the Arts on Main Street during its final stages of construction earlier this year.

Add some deep red walls facing north "to draw money in," and but for the final touches -- finishing floors and installing insulation, equipment and furnishings -- the Westside's newest cultural hub is poised for its debut in late May complete with ribbon-cutting ceremony and a star-studded fundraising gala.

More than three years in the making, the Edgemar Center for the Arts -- which counts Neil Simon, Steven Spielberg and wife Kate Capshaw (among other major theater and movie industry players) as benefactors and honorary board members -- received its Certificate of Occupancy from the City last month.

It's the go-ahead that will finally allow curtains to rise in September on the inaugural season of this long-awaited multidisciplinary performing arts venue that will house state-of-the-art 99-and 65-seat theaters "designed for the challenges of modern stage productions."

"It feels like I've just given birth to triplets," said executive artistic director Michelle Danner, who in addition to opening the center, gave birth to a son in October and completed her feature film-directing debut.

"It's been a lifelong dream to create a cultural arts center," said Danner, who co-founded the theater arts complex with partner and artistic director Larry Moss, an award-winning actor and director, who founded The Larry Moss Studio (which will take up residence at the arts center).

It was back in 1999 that one of Danner's students told her about the then empty space for lease in the Frank Gehry-designed Edgemar retail complex at 2435 Main Street. In-

trigued, Danner snuck in with a flashlight.

"I just had a moment of electricity," she said, recalling her first peek at the space. "I literally heard applause and saw lights."

But the cavernous space - which Danner envisioned as "a cultural arts center for the new generation" -- was not immediately available. The Loretta Theater, backed by another award-winning cast from the theater and film industry, had big plans for the space it planned to occupy.

When the group suddenly abandoned its plans and mysteriously disappeared without a trace in March 1999, Danner seized the opportunity and immediately began negotiating with Abby Sher, the Edgemar's visionary developer and owner. The two, it turned out, were the perfect match.

When Sher bought the former ice factory turned egg-processing plant in 1984, she knew that she wanted to develop something more than just another faceless shopping center. She wanted, she told the Los Angeles Examiner in 1988, "to create a public space," where "the business of everyday life is in close proximity to the art experience."

The site near her home, Sher decided, would be perfect for an art museum. "It had 24-foot high ceilings and was 8,000-square feet," Sher recalled recently. "Just being there on the loading dock, it had a great feeling.

"I never would have done a museum without a shopping center or a shopping center without a museum," Sher said.

For a decade, Sher held on to her vision, renting the Edgemar's largest space to the Santa Monica Museum of Art. Then, five years ago, the museum relocated to Bergamot Station, which had become a gallery hub.

While the space sat vacant, Sher remained doggedly determined to once again realize her vision of uniting everyday life with culture. Danner, ultimately, proved the right match.

"Without Abby this project would have never happened," said Danner. "She has been one of the most generous donors. She's the reason why it happened. A project like this depends solely on the generosity of donors."

Donors helped move the Edgemar Center for the Arts from dream to reality. In 1999, Spielberg and Capshaw provided \$500,000 in seed money to get the project off the ground.

Since then, the center has raised nearly \$1 million in its \$1.2 million capital funding campaign, which is ongoing. Danner and Moss hope to pay half of the arts center's estimated \$850,000 in operating costs with subscriptions and the remainder with philanthropic contributions from corporations, foundations, and individuals.

Once a deal was hammered out, Danner acquired the blue prints for the defunct Loretta and modified them from a solely theater-oriented use to one that encompassed her broader vision. The space would be a forum for a variety of performing arts with an art gallery in the lobby.

Revising the Loretta's plans sent the embryonic Edgemar Center for the Arts back to the City, where it underwent the Planning Department's onerous approval process. Construction (which began a year ago) and the challenges of fundraising to meet the arts center's \$1.2 million capital funding goal also delayed the project.

"It's not that easy to build a cultural arts center, period," Danner said. "We've signed up for the long haul -- the long, long haul. We're excited."

If the Feng Shui's advice is any indication, the space will be a creative moneymaker. The smoky blue walls of its two professional stages were a cauldron for creativity, the consultant said, but would prove a money pit if not counterbalanced. Deep red, "passionate red" walls facing north "to draw money in" was the recommendation, according to Managing Director Alexandra Guarnieri.

So deep red walls to the north it is in both theaters and, completely by accident (or maybe intuition), a box office facing north to attract even more prosperity. Throughout the 7,500 square-foot facility hints of the same red, set off by stark white walls, dot exposed piping and framework in the complex's classroom and rehearsal spaces and offices.

A collaborative effort between individual artists and already established arts groups around Los Angeles, the Edgemar Center for the Arts serves as anchor to the retail complex, which includes a café, restaurant, salon, retail shops and an annex of the Museum of Contemporary Art store.

The arts center, which plans to serve children and adults from traditionally-underserved populations in Santa Monica and the greater Los Angeles Metropolitan area, began offering some its educational outreach programs nine months ago at an interim site on the Third Street Promenade. (It moved into its permanent home at the Edgemar complex immediately upon getting the green light from the city in mid-March where classes are continuing).

Kids from Upward Bound, a Santa Monica-based organization that helps homeless families in transition, were the first to benefit from classes that teach acting to promote self-discovery.

"We see it as a way for these children to express their frustrations and pent up emotions," said Guarnieri, the managing director. The center is currently working with kids from L.A.'s Best and the YWCA programs.

"If we don't do this for our children to come and see theater and experience live art," Danner said, then "technology will win them over. Technology is not bad but... it's impor-

tant to have a place for live arts -- dance, theater, all under one roof."

The new theater complex promises to be a unique venue for both established and aspiring playwrights to develop their material. The Creative Theater Group, another of Danner's creative endeavors, will take up residence at the center and will present productions for the main stage.

The center will also offer film screenings and plans to host a two-week festival each spring that will include features, documentaries and shorts in a variety of formats.

Audiences also will be able to enjoy interactive cabaret and jazz performances as well as musical theater productions on both stages. Additionally, the center, in collaboration with the Fountain Theater, plans to host a flamenco dance season.

The arts center's first exhibit in its lobby gallery is a collection of Michael Tighe photographs featuring "stunning portraits and private moments from numerous movie sets." The exhibit opens May 29 with a reception hosted by Keifer Sutherland. An installation of works by painter and muralist Natalie Gray will follow this summer.

And beginning in June, a number of cabaret shows and one-actor performances will take center stage in both theaters leading up to the center's inaugural season in the fall. A Tennessee Williams festival is planned to kick-off the opening season.

Touted as a premiere outlet for quality theater in Santa Monica, the non-profit venue was approved by the City Council in August 1997 amid protests from neighbors who worried the theater would increase noise and congestion. It received the final go-ahead from the California Coastal Commission in February 1998.