

Edgemar Center for the Arts, "The Night of the Black Cat," and the Woman Behind It All

BY KATRINA KAUFMAN PHOTOGRAPHY ELISA HABER



Edgemar's executive artistic director and co-founder Michelle Danner in a rare still moment

Upon arriving at the Edgemar complex on Main Street in Santa Monica, this writer was immediately drawn to the large concrete column announcing its presence; the word "EDGEMAR" boldly scaled the wall. I followed this sign upstairs, assuming that this soaring symbol must point in the right direction. I was wrong. However, on stepping into the elevator to return to the main plaza I was glad for my mistake. The walls of this elevator were actually blackboards, a free forum for riders to scrawl on while traveling up and down. This creative welcome felt very appropriate, and exciting, considering the place I was about to visit, The Edgemar Center for the Arts.

A bustling new center of artistic creativity, Edgemar currently conjures up images of the Montmartre district of Paris in the late nineteenth century. Montmartre was a haven for the arts in Paris. It was the stomping ground of Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, Baudelaire, as well as many other famous artists and intellectuals. As Montmartre was once to Paris, Edgemar aspires to be to Los Angeles. It is a new mecca for art, experimentation, and public outreach.

Edgemar, which opened in 2003, is an innovative establishment committed to providing a collaborative and open forum for actors, musicians, writers, and artists of all kinds, as well as a place for children to experience and engage in the arts.

In the short time that it has been open, Edgemar has already become a lively artistic community. The tour de force of co-founders Michelle Danner and Larry Moss, Edgemar has unveiled a number of theatrical world premieres and original productions, and boasts two state-of-the-art theaters, an art gallery, and a number of youth outreach programs, as well as the prestigious Larry Moss Studio (where both Moss and Danner are acting coaches).

Edgemar's newest original production, "The Night of the Black Cat," is based on the cabaret "Le Chat Noir," which opened in Montmartre in 1891. "Le Chat Noir" was a place where poets, artists, philosophers, actors, dancers, and composers could come together to perform, revel, engage, and critique the world around them.

Embodying the era and spirit of the original "Le Chat Noir," Edgemar's cabaret is a provocative and exciting collaborative production featuring an array of eminent historical characters, including Picasso, Jane Avril, Marlene Dietrich, Paul Valery, and Edith Piaf. A wild night of music, dance, song, poetry, art, and revelry, including special appearances by George Clinton and others, "The Night of the Black Cat," directed by Deborah La Vine, brings the thrill and originality of Montmartre's cabaret to Los Angeles, while poignantly exemplifying Edgemar's own mission to embrace and engage Los Angeles' eclectic artistic community.

Venice recently had the pleasure of meeting with Michelle Danner, Edgemar's executive artistic director and co-founder, to discuss the Edgemar Center for the Arts, its upcoming cabaret extravaganza, and how Danner found herself spearheading this remarkable artistic sanctuary.

Venice: What inspired you to establish an arts center?

Michelle Danner: You know, I always wanted to do this. Other people told me, don't do it. It's too hard. But I had to do it. There was a force in me.

Now that Edgemar has opened, do you feel that your mission for this center to be a creative and collaborative artistic space is being accomplished?

It has been more than accomplished. Our mission was very ambitious, so this is great. There is constantly something going on in [Edgemar's] spaces. Whether there's an outreach program for children, a music event, a dance event, we're constantly hopping.

Where did the name "Edgemar" come from?

I like to say it's the "edge of the mar," but it was the Edgemar Dairy — they sold eggs there before Frank Gehry designed it. So we inherited the name.

Edgemar has some very high profile honorary board members, like Steven Spielberg and Jason Alexander. What kind of support do they provide?

They are people who come when we do our annual fundraisers, who know what Edgemar stands for, and support it. Not ongoing financial support. I think that there is a misperception that we are very well funded.

Is it true that you consulted a Feng Shui expert when you were designing the arts center?

Yes, this Feng Shui lady came, and she said, "You are swimming in creativity but not in dough, so you have to paint the back wall of the theater red for money to come to you." So we did.

Do you think it's working?

I'll try anything once.

What kinds of productions have been at Edgemar so far?

Since we've opened our doors we've done a lot of world premieres — unique shows like the Black Cat cabaret. It has been a dream of ours to have this cultural arts center. It is a real place of creativity.

"The Night of the Black Cat" previously ran for a few nights in December. How was the show received?

The passion was so palpable. After one of the shows, a board member stood up and said, "I am a board member! And this is great." He wanted everyone to know how great he thought the show was. It's very high energy and interesting. It takes you away from what's going on in the world and all our problems.

How did you decide to put on a cabaret that is set in the late nineteenth century?

You know, it was a chain. I said, 'We're going to do a cabaret.' Then Alexandra Guarnieri, our managing director, said, "French cabaret," because she was born in France. And the producer said, "What if we did the very first cabaret in 1881, 'The Night of the Black Cat'?" So it was a progression.

So the show is based on "The Night of the Black Cat"?

It is, but then you have historical figures that come to visit from other points in time. Picasso, Victor Hugo, and some other guests drop in.

How would you describe the cabaret?

It is a wild and sexy show, a real roller-coaster ride of music and dance and poetry. When I walked into the performance in December, people were all dressed up with garter belts. They'd welcome you at the door and say, "Bon soir. Come in." You entered this world of a French cabaret — you really thought you were in Montmartre.

The show is also going to feature some special guests, correct?

We're going to have a special appearance by George Clinton. The jazz singer Toledo is also performing. There may be guest artists on any given night.

Many people in the production are from your and Larry Moss' classes. Are you trying to establish a theater company at Edgemar?

No. We are not going to have a company of let's say sixty or eighty actors because it limits us too much. It doesn't become collaborative enough. We really want to make sure that people get a chance to audition.

What other activities take place at Edgemar?

We have a lot of outreach programs for children. One program is called Assemblies in Motion. Fifty or sixty kids come from the inner cities, and they do rap music, spoken word, a combination of things. This program saves people's lives because these kids have a place where they can come compose, create, and make music. Leila Steinberg, the director of Assemblies in Motion, leads the program. We also have kids come in from the YMCA. They do storytelling, work on camera, musical theater, art — it's very eclectic. Kids love it.



The Edgemar Center's cast of "The Night of the Black Cat"

Do the kids pay to take part in these programs?

These are free programs. They're funded through, sometimes me, sometimes other people.

How would an artist become involved in the Edgemar Center?

It depends what kind of artist they are. Recently we had a well-known baseball player who wrote a book, the story of his life. He came to us because he wanted to find a way to tell his story. So he took classes. If you're an actor, a director, a writer, it's a great place. We have a wonderful literary department, and we do monthly readings of new plays. So we have several projects in development that have never been done before.

Do you envision Edgemar more as a place for original, or for existing productions?

I think it will always be a combination, but I think there will be more focus on original work.

What are other upcoming productions at Edgemar?

We have some great new plays lined up. Then we have a Tennessee Williams festival, a poetry show, and a spring fundraiser.

Tell us about what you did before you were involved with Edgemar. Apparently you've been a producer, director, actress, and restaurateur.

I opened a restaurant on the corner of Bleecker and Christopher Street (in New York). I was five months pregnant, so I knew that I had to settle down a bit. I had just finished traveling all over the world with the Harlem Globetrotters, announcing them in five different languages. My father always had this idea of a restaurant, so we opened a creperie. The corner was so busy that the minute we opened our doors people walked in like an invasion. One of the chefs was sick, so I went downstairs to help. At the time — it was the eighties — I was wearing fake nails, and one of my nails caught fire. It went all the way up to the ceiling. And I said to myself, what am I doing? Then I miscarried, and I realized, actually I'm not going to be a mother at twenty-six. Let's sell this place; this is not what I want to do with my life. So I told my father, 'You got me into this, now you are going to get me out of it.'

Was your father a restaurateur?

My father was the President of the William Morris Agency. He opened their offices in Paris. I was always raised in a very showbiz environment. We had Frank Sinatra, Liza Minnelli, Sammy Davis, Jr.

over for dinner. We have a gallery of pictures. As a matter of fact, my father just passed away. I filmed a documentary on his life and all of the people that he worked with that I have to edit. He had so many stories to tell.

Are you of French descent?

I was born in New York. But when I was four years old we went to Paris. So my schooling was in Paris. I went to the Conservatory of Paris. A lot of my background is French. Then when I was seventeen we moved back to the United States, where I studied with Stella Adler, Uta Hagen, a lot of different people. I must have known I was going to teach one day because I ran around getting it from everybody. I had a lot of different mentors.

Were you involved in acting and the entertainment industry before the restaurant?

I did a lot of shows in New York off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway. I was the artistic director of the New York Theater Company for many years. Even when I was little in school in France, I was really popular because I would always put together shows. I adapted *The Affair of the Necklace* by Alexandre Dumas. I cast everybody in school and put them in costumes. I would do poetry things with a montage of poetry and pictures in the background and music and dance. I was very well known. The teachers loved me for being creative. But they also hated me for revolutionizing everything. I guess, looking back at my life and the things that I spearheaded, it's not a real mystery that I ended up doing this, which was in my heart for many years.

Are you still acting?

I am. I'm in the cabaret.

What is your role in the show?

I am playing Germaine de Stael. She was a writer who saw the end of Marie Antoinette, and the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte. Mme de Stael was a pioneer who made her salon a powerful political and intellectual center. Even when Bonaparte exiled her from Paris, she attracted a brilliant circle of intellectuals. A perfect part for me. [laughs] In the show, she has this affair with a younger man. The premise of this affair is that they will never lie to each other. Somebody is going to break that promise, and it is going to be heartbreaking.

It seems like you are continuing to pursue a variety of fields.

I don't like to be put in one slot. I like to wear different hats. It keeps life exciting. I love directing. I love performing. I love

teaching. I just finished an intensive seminar called the technique breakdown class. It changes people's lives. They have emotional breakthroughs. I just love watching people's light bulbs go off.

At the moment, what projects are you involved in besides Edgemar?

I'm a mother. My child is my biggest production, my most important production. I have directed a movie that is coming out this year, *How to Go Out on a Date in Queens*. I'm also in pre-production to shoot a movie here called *Counting for Thunder*.

Isn't that a one-person play?

Yes, but there are twenty characters in the screenplay. Phillip [Irwin] came into my living room with this story of him moving to a small town in Alabama to take care of his mother, who was diagnosed with stage-four lung cancer and only had two months to live. They put her on a macrobiotic diet and fought like hell, and she went into remission for two and a half years. It is a story about fighting for life, survival, and what you are willing to do.

How did you become involved with *Counting for Thunder*?

Phillip knew that my father had recently died of lung cancer, and he asked me to direct his show. I was in post-production for *How to Go Out on a Date in Queens*, and I had just had the baby, so I said no. I'm sorry I can't. Then he started to work on it in class. It was just so good and about something so profound that I couldn't say no. I'm glad that I did it because it was also healing for me to work on. I'm really looking forward to directing the movie.

It must have been interesting to be involved in the whole evolution of the show.

It's great because this is part of what happens at Edgemar — projects start from scratch. They are unique projects, like the cabaret show. The show didn't exist. Then a group of people got together. They developed historical characters. They developed music and dancing and brought in a choreographer. To me it's great when nothing exists and a project starts from absolute scratch — just, in a way, like Edgemar. It was one blank space, and from there... I find that very inspiring. ♥

The Edgemar Center for the Arts is located at 2437 Main Street, Santa Monica. "The Night of the Black Cat" will run from February 5th until March 26th; "Counting for Thunder" until February 12th. For more information visit www.edgemarcenter.org.