

The Coastal Star

Boca Raton: Becoming a home for local arts groups is center's goal

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By Mary Hladky

New York City Ballet principal dancer Sara Mearns had just received a rave review in *The New York Times* for her portrayal of Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake* when she traveled to Boca Raton to guest-star in the roles for Boca Ballet Theatre.

With Mearns' renown and the latest review celebrating her talents, it would seem that Boca Ballet tickets, priced well below those in New York, would be snapped up in nothing flat. But that didn't happen, and Dan Guin knows why.

"We were struggling to sell tickets to the same artist, largely due to the fact (the performance) was in a high school theater," said Guin, Boca Ballet's executive and co-artistic director. "Venue has been one of our largest challenges from the beginning."

While that performance took place in 2014, Guin said attracting audiences is an ongoing issue for all of Boca Raton's cultural organizations because the city does not have a professional performing arts theater.

That is the void that the backers of the Center for Arts and Innovation are determined to fill if the City Council approves a deal that would allow the center to be built. A planned Sept. 28 vote was delayed by Hurricane Ian until Oct. 12.

Andrea Virgin, the driving force behind the center who brought together the city's cultural nonprofits to create a vision for a performing arts complex in Mizner Park, says the intent is not to compete with the Kravis Center, Broward Center for the Performing Arts and Arsht Center or to bring in large Broadway spectacles like *Hamilton*.

In fact, it would make no business sense to do so, she said. Local cultural groups, including Boca Ballet Theatre, the Symphonia and Harid Conservatory, that need a professional theater don't need a venue that large, and building and operating one could triple the cost.

"There is so much more exciting programming that does not seek a 3,000-seat venue," Virgin said. The vision is a center that complements those larger theaters while providing the latest innovations in design and technology. It would be the first "multi-form" theater in South Florida.

"We believe technology has changed how audiences respond to art," said project consultant Brett Egan, president of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management. "Performing arts centers in the future need to do (more) things at once and not stick with the status quo of the last two millennia."

The complex would include a completely revamped amphitheater that can continue to operate as an outdoor venue with a capacity of up to 4,200 patrons or can be enclosed to create a studio theater to accommodate as many as 500.

A performing arts center with 900-1,100 seats would be built next to the amphitheater along with a parking garage that would be available to the public provided all the spaces are not needed for events at the center.

Other venues include a jewel box theater, a rooftop terrace and event lawn. An outdoor performance area would front the performing arts center.

The main venues can function as a traditional theater or concert hall. But what sets them apart is that they will have no fixed seating, walls, ceilings or floors. All these elements can be reconfigured to meet the needs of whatever they are used for, which gives the venues great flexibility.

The new technology that allows this flexibility extends to new ways that people can experience the arts. For example, an event in the performing arts center can be simultaneously broadcast on the outside amphitheater walls.

This will give people the ability to experience artistic events without buying a high-priced ticket or dressing up. If they are smitten, they may become regular patrons and so help boost the center's bottom line.

As to how the flexible spaces can be used, "your imagination can run wild," Virgin said.

Think corporate events, political debates, career fairs, fashion shows, product pitches, auto shows, weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs, pop-up festivals.

We intend to be the most adaptive, most friendly center in South Florida," Egan said.

While the center will have many uses, the primary focus now is improving the profitability of local cultural groups without a home.

"Servicing organizations in Boca is the core of the project," Virgin said. "When those nonprofits do well," Egan said, "the center will do well." Boca Ballet's Guin is long past ready for the change.

While he is deeply appreciative of local high schools that have allowed his organization to use their theater spaces, their venues have limitations.

No will-call. No ability to provide drinks. And there are other matters. Since the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018, stepped-up security has limited the time Guin has to get into the schools to prepare for a performance.

Dressing rooms are in short supply, as are bathrooms and showers.

"The physical ability to present the shows we do are definitely limited by the venues available," Guin said. "The hope is not only that we will have a space, but we will have several."

He believes enough donors will step forward to finance the center's construction. "I almost feel it is inevitable we will do this," he said.

Irvin Lippman, executive director of the Boca Raton Museum of Art, is a strong supporter of the cultural groups' efforts to build the center.

"All are deserving of a facility that can accommodate the quality of what they present," he said.

The center will be a "positive opportunity" for the museum as well, he said. The museum will face the event lawn and attractive new theater buildings instead of the current down-on-its-heels amphitheater. The museum has no land on which to expand and Lippman foresees opportunities to use the center's facilities for museum programs and events.

"It is a project that is worthy of support," he said, "that I think is quite doable."