

Strutting Their Stuff

One would be hard-pressed to find a public high school anywhere in the country with a greater number of accomplished alumni in the performing arts than Shaker High. Now, a capital campaign is underway to renovate the auditorium where so many of these success stories started.

BY NANCY O'CONNOR

Did you catch Michelle Federer or Michael McElroy on Broadway? Recognize Kym Whitely on TV's *My Wife and Kids* or *Grey's Anatomy*? Did you know the funny guy behind *How I Met Your Mother* is Carter Bays?

These days, Shaker High graduates are bumping into each other on studio back lots and Broadway stages, in orchestra pits and concert halls, and in editing rooms and recording studios around the world. The list of accomplished actors, writers, directors, producers, musicians, dancers, composers, and conductors goes on and on. You'd be hard-pressed to find a public high school anywhere in the country with a greater number of accomplished alumni in the performing arts. (See sidebar.)

Shaker High's exceptional Theatre Arts and Music departments offer program quality and depth seldom encountered at other public schools. Now, a capital campaign is underway to renovate the large auditorium, where so many of these success stories got their start, found their voice, honed their talents, and strutted their stuff. Once again, the Shaker Heights community is putting its money where its heart is, and more than a few of the high school's famous alums are supporting the cause.

The Shaker Schools Foundation is spearheading a \$2.4 million upgrade with the Shaker School District to restore the auditorium to its original beauty, outfit it with state-of-the-art sound and lighting, and create an outstanding teaching and learning space.

At 76, the auditorium is like an aging Hollywood starlet: a thing of beauty in her day, but now showing the ravages of time and toil that even the best of plastic surgeons can't erase. Instead of scalpels and chemicals, caretakers of the large auditorium have had to rely on duct tape and ingenuity to mask its decline.

The rigging system broke years ago, making it impossible to close or lower and lift the curtains. Once-regal drapes are now "dead hung" on poles suspended from ceiling rafters, and rips in their rotting fabric are mended with tape.

The lighting and sound systems are woefully outdated, many of the 950 seats are broken, few aisle lights are functioning, and the carpeting is worn and frayed. Patches of missing plaster dot the ceiling and walls where leaking drain basins and heavy rains have done their damage.

And, to add insult to injury, there's the overall color scheme, wryly dubbed "beautiful battleship green." It is, at best, "not aesthetically pleasing," as Theatre Arts Department Chair Christine McBurney puts it.

In short, the auditorium no longer measures up to the quality of teaching and performing that takes place in it. It has also become something of an embarrassment to those holding PTO meetings, athletic awards ceremonies, Alumni Association Hall of Fame induction assemblies, and other events in it.

Recent graduate Liz Shinkle knows the auditorium's shortcomings well. Now a stage management intern at the Cleveland Play House, Shinkle served as Stage Manager for last fall's production of *Into the Woods*.

"We had plaster fall during rehearsals and had to close for a while, with everyone worried about asbestos." (Not, as it turned out, an issue.) She also recalls the day snow fell on the student orchestra as it played on stage.

"You can have worse spaces," she says. "But it was frustrating to not be able to do traditional theatre craft, like flying in props or using stage lighting dramatically. If Shaker wants its program to continue to thrive and to train kids to move on and be successful, it needs a better theatre space."

Fortunately for the auditorium, time can be rewound and beauty restored with enough love and money. A major facelift is scheduled to get underway just after Memorial Day and be completed by December, with Grand Opening festivities planned for January 2008.

The Shaker Schools Foundation is leading the rescue mission. The Foundation typically awards grants to teachers to expand classroom instruction or fund special projects, and to individual students to recognize academic success and encourage advanced study. It has also supported professional development opportunities for faculty and staff and helped to fund improvements to learning environments.

The Foundation launched the High School Auditorium Campaign several years ago, and at the outset raised \$400,000 for the 2003 renovation of the small auditorium, which now serves as a high-tech lecture hall. Raising \$1.4 million to restore the large auditorium is the Foundation's most ambitious commitment in its 25-year history. The Shaker School District will fund the other \$1 million needed for infrastructure repairs.

“Our performing arts program at Shaker High is superior to any in the public systems around us,” says Ed Hemmelgarn, co-chair of the Foundation’s Auditorium Project Committee. “We have a really, really strong program with a history of students who excel at Shaker and professionally. But we’ve had lousy facilities, at least at the high school. It would be difficult for the schools to cover the costs of the renovation we envisioned. Students deserve this and it will enhance our school’s reputation if we support this superior program.”

Hemmelgarn, whose sons Christopher (’01) and Brandon (’06) graduated from Shaker High, is one of the largest individual donors to the Auditorium Campaign, and the small auditorium is named in honor of his father, Richard. Hemmelgarn believes the Shaker Heights community continues to give because of its confidence in how the money is spent.

“The Shaker schools have been wonderful stewards of the money. The District has done a great job of maintaining its older buildings versus tearing down and building new. I’d be willing to bet we’ve spent less on capital projects than other school systems in the area.”

Foundation President Nancy Karr, who is also the parent of two Shaker grads, Clinton (’99) and Elliott (’02), says, “We’re excited about this large undertaking, which is our first capital campaign project. It’s an opportunity for us to assist the District in funding a special project that will enrich the educational opportunities offered our students.” She is confident the Foundation will reach its fundraising goal because of the proven generosity of the Shaker Heights community.

“Shaker residents are always very supportive when there is a need. That’s just Shaker.”

The pressure is on for the Foundation’s Director of Development, long-time Shaker resident Sue Starrett, who spent 11 years as Director of Development Communications for the Cleveland Orchestra. She was heavily involved in fund raising for the renovation of Severance Hall.

Now, Starrett is busy soliciting grant monies, gifts from individual donors, and \$500 “seat endowments” to fund the auditorium project. Among the notable donations pledged thus far are leadership gifts from Edward Hemmelgarn and Janice Hammond and from the Ratner family, and a challenge grant from the Jonathan Lewis Foundation (Jonathan was a member of the Class of ’77).

While large gifts are welcomed and essential, Starrett’s hope is that every Shaker resident will participate and take pride in doing so. “We need as many participants as possible, who can then be proud that they helped build this,” says the mother of Ned (’97) and Charles (’01) Sackman. “This is such a worthy cause and the kids are so deserving.”

Affection for Shaker High and its theatre and music programs runs deep among parents as well as students. Donna Jackson and Lynn Lilly are convinced the programs were instrumental in shaping their kids. They credit the department’s long-time chair, James Thornton, who retired three years ago, with having a profound influence on the program as well as the students involved in it.

“Mr. Thornton basically built the theater department from an after-school program into what it is today, a full-bodied curriculum with offerings some small colleges don’t even offer,” says Jackson, mother of Tina (’03) and David (’04).

Lilly, mother of Preston Goforth, (’00), Derek Prijatel (’02), and Lindsay Goforth (’02) continues to support the program “because of my absolute certainty that Mr. Thornton helped shaped the lives of my children, enabling them to discover the depth of their own creativity, and teaching them the power of creativity in all kinds of work.”

While former students and their parents are apt to be supportive of the auditorium campaign, those most excited about it are current and upcoming Shaker High students and the high school instructors.

“The auditorium is our extended classroom,” says department chair McBurney, who oversees the fall mainstage play and New Stages, teaches Playwriting, Acting, Film as Art, and Junior Ensemble, and serves as Director of the Playwriting program. “Our class work feeds into production work, and vice versa.”

The program, she emphasizes, “is about more than just putting on shows. We teach and value process and product. Our goal is to educate students in a guided learning environment. We’re really using theatre as a model to teach human values like empathy, vulnerability, teamwork, and communication. Students don’t just perform. They write, produce, direct, stage manage, design, and chair management teams.”

What makes the program special, she believes, “is that any student – no matter what his or her talents or interests – can play a role in the department. For example, New Stages and the Patron program were student-generated ideas.”

McBurney and Music Department Chair Robert Schneider were invited to discuss their programs’ needs with the renovation design team at City Architecture, Inc., the same firm behind Shaker’s new housing developments, Sussex Courts and Avalon Station.

Auditorium Manager Chuck Tisdale has also been involved in the planning. A trained actor, director, and technical manager, Tisdale leads the Stage Crew extracurricular program for kids interested in behind-the-scenes-work such as stage lighting, sound, set-building, and more.

He's looking forward to having modern lighting and sound systems that will enable him to provide more creative and professional lighting and sound support to students' theatrical, dance, and musical performances. "Our current lighting board is from 1987. Imagine trying to do your work on a 1987 computer." He's had to scour eBay to find replacement parts, as the system is no longer manufactured.

City Architecture's Project Manager Kevin Dreyfuss-Wells says the mission is to take "a beautiful, historic space and fantastic educational resource and get it back to its original condition so it can continue for another 75 years, while also enhancing it to meet the needs of this century."

Built in 1931, the high school and its large auditorium were designed by Hubbell and Benes, a noted design group responsible for many Cleveland landmarks, including the Cleveland Museum of Art and West Side Market.

"Shaker is very fortunate to have one of their structures," says Dreyfuss-Wells. "It's been a joy to look at their original drawings and the level of care and detail in them. At the time, it was a nice auditorium, but by today's standards, it's a magnificent resource."

The wood paneling and plaster details on the walls, dulled by layers of paint, will be restored. Fluorescent lights that obscure the ornamental ceiling plastering and grills will be removed, and historically appropriate paint colors will be used throughout the space.

New lighting and sound systems will be installed, along with a new rigging system and a more flexible "thrust" stage system that will allow stage area to be easily added or removed. The seats will be completely refurbished, and those in the front rows will be turned to face the thrust stage to bring the performers closer to the audience.

"There's an old theatre saying, 'All you need is two boards and a passion,'" says Tisdale. "But it sure helps to have theatrical lighting, sound, costumes, and makeup. The auditorium is another classroom, one that's used nearly every period of every day and most evenings. But it is sorely in need of renovation. It's time to give students what they need."

The "new" auditorium, Liz Shinkle predicts, "will be energizing and inspiring. There will be no limit to what the students can do."

Shaker Schools Foundation High School Auditorium Campaign

LEVELS OF GIVING

Lead Benefactor
\$200,000 and more

Benefactor
\$100,000 to \$199,999

Lead Patron
\$50,000 to \$99,999

Patron
\$25,000 to \$49,999

Leadership Donor
\$10,000 to \$24,999

Major Donor
\$5,000 to \$9,999

Donor
\$1,000 to \$4,999

All gifts of \$1,000 and more will be recognized on a bronze plaque displayed near the High School auditorium.

NAMING OPPORTUNITIES

Large Auditorium	\$ 800,000
Stage	400,000
Foyer	200,000
Stage curtain and rigging	150,000
Theatrical lighting system	100,000
Theatrical sound system	100,000
Projection/control booth	50,000
Black box theatre (reserved)	30,000
Scene shop	25,000
Chandeliers (7)	10,000

All naming rights will be granted in perpetuity.

The Shaker Schools Foundation is pleased to announce a seat endowment program for the large auditorium. Seats may be named for gifts of \$500 each, and many donors are doing so in honor or memory of favorite Shaker teachers, family members, or friends. Others are endowing seats for their children or in their own names. All gifts are tax-deductible, and checks or credit cards are being accepted. Please contact the Foundation for more information by calling 295-4329.

JAMIE BABBIT, Class of 1989, is an Emmy-nominated director, producer, and screenwriter who made her directorial debut with *But I'm a Cheerleader* in 1999. Her 2006 film, *The Quiet*, has also earned critical acclaim. Babbit has also directed episodes for numerous television shows, including *Gilmore Girls*, *The Bernie Mac Show*, and *Ugly Betty*.

CARTER BAYS, Class of 1993, is executive producer and head writer for the current television hit, *How I Met Your Mother*. He's also written for numerous other television sitcoms and earned an Emmy nomination for his work on *The Late Show with David Letterman*.

ED BLUNT, Class of 1988, has appeared in several feature films and numerous television shows, including *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* and *This Band of Brothers*.

KELLY CHAPMAN, Class of 1985, is a singer-actress who has sung internationally and appeared in several feature films, including *The Antwone Fisher Story*.

TRACY NICOLE CHAPMAN, Class of 1988, has appeared on Broadway in *The Lion King*, *Caroline or Change*, and the 2002 revival of *Into the Woods*.

MICHELLE FEDERER, Class of 1991, is a stage and film actress. She originated the role of Nessarose in the Broadway musical *Wicked*, and has been featured in several films, including *Kinsey* and *The Flannel Pajamas*.

LAUREN GEBER, Class of 2002, is a jazz vocalist with a passion for musical theater. She recently returned to the area from New York City to direct *Little Shop of Horrors* at the Heights Youth Theater.

DANA GOODMAN, Class of 1992, is one of the creative forces behind *The Tao of Steve*, a romantic comedy that debuted at the Sundance Film Festival and was later released by Sony Pictures Classics.

BETSY HOGG, Class of 2006, has appeared on Broadway in *The Crucible* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, off-Broadway in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and on television in *Law & Order: SVU*.

REBEKAH JOHNSON, Class of 1990, has appeared in several films, including *Liberty Heights* and HBO's *Tyson*. The singer-actress has also recorded several CDs.

SARAH KNOWLTON, Class of 1987, has appeared on many of television's hottest shows, including *Ugly Betty*, *Law & Order*, *Third Watch*, and *Spin City*.

MICHAEL McELROY, Class of 1985, has many Broadway credits and was nominated for a 2004 Tony Award for his performance as Jim in *Big River*. He is also featured on numerous CD recordings and founded the Broadway Gospel Choir and the Broadway Inspirational Voices.

HANS RINDERKNECHT, Class of 2003, emerged as a force in the dance world while still a student at Princeton. In 2005, he danced in the world premiere of Sergei Prokofiev's *Le Pas d'Acier* and will perform in *The Rite of Spring*, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, in Kobe, Japan this year.

TODD ANTHONY SAMS, Class of 1990, is an award-winning choreographer whose work includes music videos for Usher, Toni Braxton, Chris Brown, and Frankie J. He has worked with Tyrese, Destiny's Child, and Queen Latifah, and has appeared as a dancer with Michael Jackson and En Vogue.

MATT THORNTON, Class of 1992, currently performs with the Pilobolus Dance Theatre.

DAVID WAIN, Class of 1987, is an actor, filmmaker, producer, and co-founder of the comedy troupe, STELLA. He directed, co-wrote, and co-produced the cult summer camp film *Wet, Hot American Summer*, and another film, *The Ten*, due to be released this year.

KYM E. WHITELEY, Class of 1980, has made more than 40 appearances on many of television's most popular shows, including *Grey's Anatomy* and *My Wife and Kids*.

ROBERT WOOD, Class of 1988, made his conducting debut with Verdi's *La Traviata* at the San Francisco Opera. He is now conductor in residence at the Minnesota Opera, where he will soon debut the first-ever operatic adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*. This summer, he returns to the Wolf Trap Festival to conduct Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.