

CAL-STATE-FULLERTON

## CSUF's Performing Arts Center enriches campus, community culture

Complex draws theater and dance, music and visual arts students



Dale Merrill, CSUF's College of the Arts dean, stands in one of three performance spaces in the arts center. (File photo)

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From the outside, the Joseph Claves III Performing Arts Center can fool you. Dressed conservatively in light-gray brick, the 13-year-old, 109,000-square-foot complex does a good job of blending in with many other buildings on the sprawling campus of Cal State Fullerton.

But inside, it's a different story: a well-appointed warren of three performance spaces and large rehearsal halls that rivals the best arts facilities anywhere in American academia. In addition to the 150-seat Dale and Millie Hallberg Theatre and the 250-seat James D. Young Theatre, the crown jewel of the complex is the 800-seat Vaughncille Joseph Meng Concert Hall, an elegant venue dedicated to music, with rich, harmonious textures and colors, superior acoustics and excellent sightlines from every corner. It looks more like a well-appointed civic performing arts center than a university facility.

How did CSUF end up with one of the most beautiful and smartly designed campus arts complexes in the country?

It started with an edict from the California State University Office of the Chancellor to build large theaters on its campuses. The Claves Performing Arts Center was proposed as part of an expansion of the existing Performing Arts Center, which was built in 1964. For years, the biggest performance space on campus was the old center's Little Theatre, with a seating capacity of about 500. The university's burgeoning programs in theater, dance and music desperately needed better facilities.

The chancellor's grand plan called for 1,200-seat theaters for its campuses — enormous by university standards. Fortunately, CSUF adopted a smarter and more practical approach.

"Instead of building a multipurpose hall that is so big and doesn't really serve the community or the curriculum, they built three really distinct theaters and support space. That support space is very important," said Dale Merrill, dean of the College of the Arts. In addition to its performance and rehearsal spaces, the complex includes dressing rooms, a recording studio, costume and scene shops, and a make-up studio.

Groundbreaking on the \$48.5 million expansion began in the spring of 2003. The official grand opening was on Jan. 13, 2006. State funding provided most of the money, supplemented by donations from alumni, faculty, administrators and staff.

In 2008, trustees from the Joseph A.W. Clayes III Charitable Trust announced a \$5 million gift to the university for scholarships and programming in the performing arts. As a result, the board of trustees approved a new name for the complex: the Joseph Clayes III Performing Arts Center.

The facility “is totally student-focused,” said Joseph Arnold, dean emeritus of CSUF’s College of the Arts. “It is used by the students – they rehearse in it, they perform in it – and it is completely tied to the educational mission of the College of the Arts. And that makes it rather unique.”

Since its opening, CSUF’s performing arts facility has proved to be an excellent recruiting tool.

“It certainly has an effect in terms of recruiting talent because of the quality of the facilities,” Arnold said. “Its focus is on a pre-professional and professional training program and that really has been the central focus of all three departments – theater and dance, music and visual arts.”

A big attraction for performing arts students is rehearsal space, he said.

“The students actually have the opportunity to rehearse in the space in which they are performing rather than rehearsing in a large room and then all of a sudden moving into the physical space itself and adjusting to that,” he said.

The Meng Concert Hall is also a big draw for prospective students. “Very few universities have a dedicated music hall,” Merrill said.

For Arnold, it’s all about the sound.

“It’s the remarkable acoustics of this house that I think separates it from others,” he said. “It is an extraordinary hall to listen to music in.”

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