



The Shakespeare Theater Company debuts new digs in Washington, featuring the \$89 million, 750-seat Sidney Harman Hall.

## BARD BOASTS BUILDING BUZZ ALONG BELTWAY

By PAUL HARRIS

**WASHINGTON** A new era in D.C. theater dawns this week with the debut of the Shakespeare Theater Company's new \$89 million Sidney Harman Hall, a sleek and functional space that's certain to elevate the profile of the Bard and his buddies in the nation's capital.

The 750-seat house underscores the emergence of the Shakespeare Theater as the city's largest theater company, with a \$19 million operating budget and a dramatically expanded mission. It also will become an important new downtown venue for medium-sized arts orgs of all stripes and a likely destination for tourists.

Artistic director Michael Kahn calls the new facility the cornerstone of his much anticipated "Shakespeare Theater for the 21st century." It bows here in grand style Oct. 1 with a gala fund-raiser expected to raise \$2 million that will feature performances from Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and actress Patti LuPone.

Harman Hall is part of an 11-story building co-owned by the company with the Intl. Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers. Designed by Canadian architect Jack Diamond, the theater features a versatile stage that can be rapidly configured to proscenium, thrust or semi-arena. The first several rows of seats are on movable wagons that can accommodate three-quarter or "in-the-round" viewing.

The facility was named in honor of businessman Sidney Harman, who with his wife, Rep. Jane Harman (D-Calif.), donated \$20 million toward the project. Together with the com-

pany's existing 451-seat Lansburgh Theater, the complex has been renamed the Harman Center for the Arts.

The new mandate broadens the scope of an org that seeks to be considered the country's premier classic theater. It also is slated to be a multipurpose performing arts org that will rent out its two spaces when not in use. To date, it has partnered with Washington Ballet, Washington Performing Arts Society, CityDance Ensemble and Summer Opera Theater Company, among other local orgs.

It also will expand its season from five productions to eight, and will present periodic repertory perfs, so that visitors can catch several related plays on a weekend. To demonstrate its new vision, STC opens Harman Hall with two plays by Shakespeare contemporary Christopher Marlowe while launching the Lansburgh with "The Taming of the Shrew."

Finished on time and substantially on budget, the project owes its success to a D.C. government that donated \$20 million toward the effort, managing director Nicholas Goldsborough says.

"We now have the opportunity to present other productions that will greatly expand the kind of material we're doing," Goldsborough continues. That will mean more foreign-language plays in new translations, as well as American classics, he predicts. The org also aspires to become a presenter that will support appearances by national and international arts orgs, and perhaps tours by other members of the League of Resident Theaters from around the country.

MARK BLANKENSHIP

# Tuner fest tests ideas

HOW DO YOU FIND A GOOD SHOW IN the New York Musical Theater Festival?

Its fourth season, which runs through Oct. 7, boasts 34 new tuners, and most of them seduce auds with intriguing concepts, catchy titles and established stage performers. However, anyone with festival experience knows those kinds of promises are usually broken. Ultimately, auds just have to buy their \$20 tickets and hope for the best.

As usual with NYMF, buzz isn't narrowing the field. Internet chatter hasn't anointed a clear favorite, and anecdotal research suggests most shows are selling well. It may be several weeks before we know if the fest has produced its next "Altar Boyz."

But if nothing else, it has demonstrated that writers haven't run out of ideas. Among the impressively diverse offerings are "Sherlock Holmes (The Early Years)," a romantic comedy about the classic detective; "Maccabeat!" a Hanukkah musical that references everything from boy bands to doo-wop; and "Virtuosa," a biotuner about composer Clara Schumann that features only one actress and one pianist.

One of the fest's most inventive musicals is also one of its most successful. "Going Down Swingin'" transplants the story of "Don Giovanni" to a 1950s radio station studio, where the onslaught of television and the threat of younger men is making cad-dish host Dean Newhouse (Christopher Shyer) fear for his future.

Composer Peter Hilliard and lyricist-librettist Matt Borelli hurl several conceits at the audience, but all of them land with graceful wit.

The production unfolds over a day of rehearsals for various radio shows, and the central plot emerges as Newhouse bickers with his co-stars during breaks.

Shuttling between parody radio programs and the darker story of Newhouse's immorality, Borelli ably balances the light with the sinister. The show could use another rewrite, particularly for its overcomplicated ending, but the script's journey to smart, satisfying entertainment feels almost complete.

Highlights include Marla Schaffel as Dean's tough-dame ex-girlfriend; and Tom Deckman as an actor in his late 20s, still playing the dorky teenager in a wholesome comedy. The disconnection between his "aw-shucks" voice and "this sucks" face is charming.

As star of "The Yellow Wood," Jason Tam is charming, too, though his energy gets wasted on weak material. Written by

Michelle Elliott and Danny Larsen — and directed by actor B.D. Wong — this ambitious drama follows Adam, a Korean teenager trying to find his path in life.

The score blends Korean influences, teen pop and, of all things, videogame sounds. The resulting hodgepodge is interesting but shapeless, just like the book. Because they never decide which issue is most important to their story — be it Adam's resentment of his Korean heritage, his quest to get off Ritalin, his fear of his own imagination or his improbable run for class president — Elliott and Larsen short-change them all.

"Unlock'd" could also use some editing. Based on Alexander Pope's mock-heroic poem "The Rape of the Lock," Sam Carner and

Derek Gregor's comic tuner follows a silly damsel who loves her hair — each strand is individually named — more than any of her suitors.

Both Carner's words and Gregor's music have hints of inspiration, but they overwork their best moments. A trio of feisty gnomes may have a cute theme song, for example, but by the fourth time they croon it, it's tedious. Trimmed of its fat, the show would be a much tastier trifle.

For a lesson on how to deliver a joke, Carner and Gregor can turn to "I See London, I See France (The Underwear Musical)." Despite a rushed, unconvincing conclusion, it delivers a feel-good feminist message with catchy pop hooks and a plot that hums like an engine.

Thanks to writers Jeremy Desmon and Vid Guerrero and star Sandy Rustin, we're treated to airy fun as ad exec Gina realizes her life as a "smart girl" has left her 35 and lonely. Even more troubling, she keeps seeing a trio of perky bimbos (all named Bunny) who

sing about the sex she's not having, and every time she meets with an underwear model (Nicholas Ardell), she can only see him in his skivvies.

We see Ardell in his underwear, too, which provides us with eye candy and helps us empathize with Gina's plight. Flustered and hopeful, she becomes an endearing heroine who can legitimately anchor a musical.

The writers employ enough social commentary to elevate the show above fluff, but they deserve the most praise for freshening up a hoary girl-power narrative. If it ever does break away from the NYMF pack, "I See London, I See France" will likely be a crowdpleaser.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK



"Going Down Swingin'," above, and "I See London, I See France (The Underwear Musical)" were highlights of the tuner fest.