

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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## Pittsburgh Musical Theater Steps Toward Future

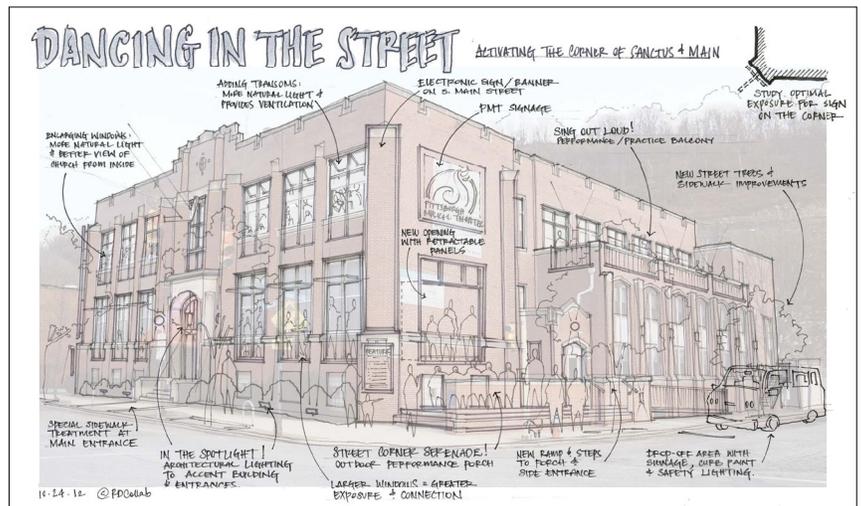
By Sharon Eberson

Pittsburgh Musical Theater has resided in the West End as a renter for 12 years, but now it's putting down roots as a property owner with a commitment to become a vital member of that community.

The school will continue its primary focus of education and performance for hundreds of students, ages 4 to 18, annually, and there are the big productions PMT is known for that mix pros and students at the Byham Theater, Downtown. But as the organization approaches its 25th year in 2015, founder and artistic director Ken Gargaro was looking for a way to be sustainable for 25 more. To that end, PMT is within weeks of becoming the owner of the 29,000-square-foot James Centre at 327 S. Main St.

"If I had it to do over again, I would have bought a building or taken out a mortgage and built the company on real estate rather than on a dream," Mr. Gargaro said. "Because show business is really the real estate business. If you don't have property, you can't make a balance sheet work."

The new model includes a home base beyond the physical property, a place where everyone knows the Pittsburgh Musical Theater name and feels welcome. It's the ingredient that has been missing as the school/theater company has survived these nearly 25 years on "a strong earned-income record"



-- 70 percent based on enrollment and ticket sales, 30 percent from donors.

"It's been that way through thick and thin," Mr. Gargaro said. "But because performing Equity productions Downtown is so expensive, we need to expand in other ways to sustain. I'm confident that this was the only way forward. This is based upon research nationwide of what happens to some mid-size arts organizations. Either they get really big or they become absolutely essential to a community."

With Pittsburgh CLO established as the "really big" musical theater organization in town, PMT decided on the latter option.

PMT signed a sales agreement and put down 5 percent of the \$525,000 price for its new building

18 months ago. With donations from the Richard K. Mellon Foundation and Heinz Endowments and the support of members of the board, the company raised \$1.5 million in six months and will close on time, plus be able to do necessary renovations, with the roof and classroom space needing the most immediate attention. The next phase is to raise another \$1.5 million "to unlock the full potential of the building," Mr. Gargaro said.

Plans by lead architect Ken Doyno of Rothschild Doyno Collaborative -- Mr. Doyno has two daughters who are enrolled at PMT -- include small outdoor performance spaces, and one of Mr. Gargaro's dreams is to incorporate a corner cafe into the building, but those are second-phase goals.

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The money raised so far will go not just toward the physical structure, but also toward cementing relationships and increasing student enrollment from the West End and its adjoining neighborhoods.

"The sketch [by Mr. Doyno] is a vision of what can happen in activating the West End area in using the building, and I think that's how I sold the foundations on coming to bat," Mr. Gargaro said. "We've set aside some money for a liaison to approach churches, community organizations, things that are already in place. We have been working very closely with Theresa Kail-Smith [councilwoman and founder of the West End Alliance] and [state Rep.] Dan Deasy to identify where we might find students who have some motivation and have support to get them to their lessons."

Another suburban company has followed a similar model. In 2012, Off the Wall Theater moved from Washington, Pa., into a 96-seat storefront theater on Main Street in Carnegie, which welcomed the company that is known for edgy, adult dramas. The space has since attracted productions by No Name Players, and the Pittsburgh New Works Festival moved there this year.

A big part of the PMT plan is for the current banquet space that

includes a tier overlooking the floor to become a 299-seat theater for programming and rental.

"The exciting part will be the Little Victorian Hall, as we call it, will now be available to us free and clear," Mr. Gargaro said. "My concept right now is the weekends fall to spring will be children's theater. Our target audience is 4- to 9-year-olds, fulfilling a niche that the Playhouse Jr. used to fill in the old days, when they had regular weekend shows for kids [it does it in May now]. It will be a laboratory for our high school kids; they will be the performers like the college kids used to be at Playhouse Jr. It's a concept I learned at the Playhouse and want to reinvent in terms of our constituents."

Evenings would be devoted to more adult programming. Mr. Gargaro gives as examples "My Name Is Asher Lev," the play based on the Chaim Potok novel, to "edgy things that can draw the South Side crowd," such as "Toxic Avenger" and "The Donkey Show," an all-male disco show with characters inspired by "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

There are no plans for more hires as of now. The full-time staff of PMT totals four: Mr. Gargaro, general manager/conservatory director Colleen Petrucci, development and marketing administrator Patti Knapp and technical director

Jonathan Sage. Professional actors and teaching adjuncts work with students in productions and also work with students in the Richard E. Rauh Conservatory.

PMT alumni who have appeared in Broadway shows and in films include Peter Matthew Smith, Audra Blaser, Paul McGill, Christian Delcroix, Sarah Strimmel and Tim Federle.

Seated in a local coffee shop on Wednesday, Mr. Gargaro was letting the whirlwind of the past 18 months and the campaign and construction to come sink in.

The McKees Rocks native is a University of Pittsburgh graduate who has added theater coordinator at Robert Morris University to his roles in the local stage community. He had been considering retirement when he turns 65 on Sept. 28, but that is no longer imminent, he said. When it became evident that moving the company into the future required a bold move like buying property, he knew he would have to stick around for a while. He is, after, all the face of the company that began as Gargaro Productions.

"We really want people to feel welcome walking in there," he said. "There's a lot more activity in the West End, lots of artists and there's Steinway [Piano Gallery]. Hopefully, the West End will become the next East Liberty."