

LITTLE THEATER

KATHLEEN ESLING

Librarian and Studies in Literature & English Language Faculty

Whether it be for Friday Morning Singing, assemblies, back-to-school nights or other gatherings, Convent & Stuart Hall's Little Theater is a major community hub. Despite the frequency of its use, the Little Theater had not been renovated for decades.

After meetings with architects and faculty artists, and driven by the school's strategic plan to match enhancements in the performing arts program with a reimagined space fit for both theatrical and instrumental performance, the Little Theater is actively under construction. The architectural plan will restore this magnificent space – originally the ballroom of the Flood Mansion – to its former glory, and the new space will accommodate different genres of performance to the highest standard.



The former Little Theater space was not equipped for high-level instruction or performance. The Syufy Theatre was designed for stage performance and did not have sufficient space to accommodate orchestral performance. Additionally, both Syufy and the Little Theater had proscenium stages, so could not support non-traditional performance or workshop formats. The Little Theater redesign will offer a more flexible space, allowing for both large and small instrumental performances, lectures and community gatherings. On the east side of the room, a projection wall created by a suspended lighting grid allows the center of the room to be lit for performance, making possible a "theater in the round" experience. The redesign also extends to the space outside of the theater, making for another gathering area to mirror the grandeur and spaciousness of the Belvedere in the Main Hall.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Head of Stuart Hall for Boys Kevin Brenner leading an assembly in the old Little Theater. A seventh grader rehearsing in the old band room. Architectural renderings for the new Little Theater and lobby.

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Music education has become an integral part of the Performing Arts curriculum, beginning with a coeducational Grade 5 instrumental music class. In this yearlong commitment, students try out different instruments and select one to focus on for the year, which culminates in a class ensemble performance. Most students remain in the instrumental music elective and deepen their study of the instrument they selected. The success of the instrumental music offering during the school day has created the enviable situation of stretching the capacity of the stage in the Syufy Theatre with an elementary program that includes 120 students and an equally robust high school program.

Having a home in the renovated Little Theater will afford the music program new and exciting performance opportunities. Smaller ensembles can practice and perform in this new space, specifically designed for the acoustics of a musical performance. Music concerts and other performances can occur more frequently now that they are not vying for time on the Syufy Theatre stage, allowing more opportunities for students to compose, design and perform their productions. Performing Arts Faculty Chauncey Aceret '06 reflects: "We will have less scheduling conflicts, more options acoustically and visually, and most important, we will be able to teach our

kids how to perform in a space specifically made to do that very thing. The Little Theater has a very special place in my heart. My brother Ryley Aceret '15'11 and I are both alumni of Schools of the Sacred Heart and spent many hours in the Little Theater either performing, watching a performance or attending an assembly or special event. Having access to a performance venue, with updated acoustics, panels and aesthetics can really positively impact a performance."

Amy Tan, another member of the Performing Arts faculty, adds: "I think with the renovation of this space, Convent & Stuart Hall will see a growth in art appreciation and an uncovering of talents amongst us." Band Director Leandro Joaquim agrees wholeheartedly, adding that the new space "brings motivation for students and faculty, access to new technologies, equipment and different interaction between the band, strings, musicals and vocals. I'm very excited about contributing ideas and suggestions, and I'm sure that this new space will bring the level of our student artists even higher!"

"Flexible space is exciting," says Theater Programs Director Margaret Hee, explaining that having a space like the Little Theater will allow students to practice staging and performing works that do not utilize a proscenium stage. Theater Manager Chris Miller adds, "This new 'black

box' space will perfectly mesh with our plan for more frequent, less set-heavy, student-driven productions. The non-proscenium orientation and state-of-the-art lighting and sound capacities are tailor-made for exploring what theater can be. As a smaller space, it will be less intimidating than the Syufy Theatre for any student wishing to create their own world, in collaboration or solo. The 'workshop' ambiance also encourages an emphasis

as getting to see the art that my peers were capable of was so moving and powerful."

Chris also highlights another exciting renovation the Little Theater will undergo, especially as we have been dealing with the challenges of being apart during the pandemic. The school has undertaken a project to increase available bandwidth for our internet data services and will take advantage of the increased throughput to explore "video everywhere" technologies — using existing ethernet connections to send a given video feed in real time. "We could, for instance, stage a show in the Little Theater with a multi-camera, student-run documentation crew, and send that to every classroom as an alternative to bringing large groups into Syufy Theatre," Chris says. "Wireless systems also open up possibilities for 'theater everywhere' — productions staged or extended beyond the theatrical spaces per se."

When Performing Arts Department Chair Bonnie Fraenza was approached with the concept of a Little Theater renovation, in addition to the production possibilities, her mind also jumped to a much-needed functional opportunity: storage and sound-proofing. In meetings with architects, Bonnie had instrument numbers in hand (all those French horns!) and brought forward the need for the designers to soundproof the Little Theater if they wanted to make it a class space for the music program. As Director of Physical Plant and Strategic Design Facilitator Geoff De Santis explains, these meetings between faculty and designers are "one of my favorite things to do, hearing where the faculty and administration wants the teaching and learning to go." Using Bonnie's insights, the architects were able to design a thoughtful space that could truly live up to the department's needs. This new design will allow for much more flexibility in terms of the meetings, performances and other gatherings the Little Theater will host in its future. ↻

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on process over end product. We want our kids to feel free to explore any possibility they can imagine without being unduly inhibited by where that might take them." Margaret agrees, recalling a cabaret performance that senior Anya Hilpert staged earlier last year when she was a junior. Sophomore Aza Reiskin and Zoe Forbes '20 participated in this Cabaret Club as described by Anya herself: "With the help of Kat De Mesa (Gr. 12), we started the club, one that allowed for rehearsal space and time, as well as a performance night for student-driven pieces. This was such a cool thing to get to put together,

LEFT TO RIGHT: Elementary school band members practice for an upcoming performance. A scene from the theater program's production of *The Skokie Detective* Charter School. Students leaving the Little Theater after an assembly.