

The stage is set

It's just about time for the new Craterian's final touch — the audience



By **MARCIA SAVAGE**
of the Mail Tribune

Come Saturday, the noise of hammers will be replaced by the sound of sopranos in the Craterian Ginger Rogers Theater.

After 12 months of construction and at least 10 years of planning, the performing arts center will throw open its doors in downtown Medford with a performance by the Rogue Valley Chorale.

The theater, a \$5.2 million renovation project, is touted all around: as a key for downtown revitalization, a boon for local performers and a cure for Medford's lack of a cultural center.

"This is going to be a wonderful asset for our whole community," said Medford City Councilwoman Lee Ferguson, almost breathless with anticipation. "It isn't something we've had in the past. We haven't had a cultural center. I think it's going to enhance our community for years to come."

Don Burt, Medford Urban Renewal Agency director, predicts the theater will be a major anchor downtown, drawing people and new

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What you'll see inside

By **BILL VARBLE**
of the Mail Tribune

A large mural inside the entrance of the new Craterian Ginger Rogers Theater will honor the theater's namesake.

Cross the green floral carpet with the art deco look to the computerized ticket islands to pick up will-call tickets or buy tickets for future events.

Beer, wine, soft drinks, cookies and savories will be available from volunteers in the lobby.

There are 11 bathroom stalls for women with seven more coming soon, and three for men.

In the auditorium are 537 seats on the main floor and 205 in the balcony. Controls for lights, sound and stage management are at the rear of the auditorium, which is hard-wired for communications so that a stage manager in the booth can give lighting and sound directions

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Top, Lynn Sjolund's got his tux and his baton at the ready for Saturday's concert at the Craterian Ginger Rogers Theater. Sjolund directs the Rogue Valley Chorale, the first group to perform at the remodeled theater, above, and leads the Craterian Performances Company.

Mail Tribune/Bob Pennell photos

Craterian

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businesses to an area that's nearly deserted after business hours.

"It's an activity center," he said. "It generates people, activity."

The road to creating a cultural center for Medford hasn't been easy.

Plans for turning the 73-year-old former vaudeville and movie theater into a performing arts center started taking shape more than a decade ago. The nonprofit Craterian Performances Company formed and, in 1993, kicked off a \$2.9 million campaign to raise money for the project.

But once work began on the project, the price tag shot up. Unexpected structural reinforcements and additional features — including roomier seating and a computerized ticket system — drove the cost up to \$5.2 million.

Last summer, with construction well under way, the project drew criticism from some for being too pricey. Some said building a new theater would have been cheaper while others criticized spending public money on the project. Organizers said a new building would have cost

\$1.3 million more.

Public funding for the theater included \$400,000 from the city of Medford, \$1.4 million from the Medford Urban Renewal Agency, and \$500,000 in state lottery proceeds. Other funds came from donations by individuals, private businesses and foundations.

But Ferguson is confident the city will get a high return on its investment.

"I don't think you can measure its value in how much it cost to renovate," she said. "I think we're going to get that money back ten-fold."

About \$10,000 more is needed to reach the \$5.2 million goal, said Stephen McCandless, the theater's director.

Last week, as crews scrambled to finish the theater in time for the opening, McCandless said he and his small staff were dealing with "the practicalities" of putting on a show, including training volunteers who will help staff events.

The theater will provide a creative outlet, he said.

"I think our community has been kind of starved for an opportunity like this, where we can

come together as performers and patrons to be entertained, enlightened and emboldened."

Lynn Sjolund, president of the Craterian Performances Company's board of directors, said the theater will "give Medford a real center for the town itself."

The venue will offer an array of cultural offerings and activities to appeal to all tastes, he said.

After all the renovation hurdles, Sjolund said he's pleased with the end product. "I think it's going to function and flow really well."

Even after the opening, though, there's still work to be done, he said. That work includes finishing second-floor rehearsal space, bathrooms and offices and paying off the mortgage on the building. Last December, the Craterian Performances Company bought the old theater from the Rogue Valley Art Association for \$275,000.

McCandless said the group needs to raise about \$200,000 for the remaining construction. He said it will likely launch a capital campaign to pay off the mortgage in a couple of years.

The city of Medford and the urban renewal agency have an

option agreement to buy the theater for the balance of the outstanding mortgage if it ceases to operate as a nonprofit community theater. Burt said the agreement is intended to protect the public's investment.

Although the theater will help the downtown, "it's not the end-all to our problems," he said. More parking and other improvements are needed and are in the works, he said. The agency is working on a downtown redevelopment effort that will cost an estimated \$12 million.

One of those improvements, the \$625,000 revitalization of Vogel Park, will be nearly finished by the time the theater opens. The goal is to turn the park, at the corner of Main Street and Central Avenue next to the theater, into an open, attractive gathering spot.

Richard Rahmlow, owner of Rogue Travel at 14 S. Central Ave., is among the downtown business people who are excited about the theater's opening.

"I feel the Craterian is definitely a plus for the core of the downtown area," he said.

Rahmlow said he might try out extended hours during the sum-

mer, to catch some of theater traffic, and might host travel presentations in the theater.

Dean Torrey, owner of C.K. Tiffin's, 226 E. Main St., said the restaurant might begin serving dinner and operating on Saturdays once he sees what kind of draw the theater has.

"I think it's actually going to help in getting more people to come downtown," he said.

While Mark Seus, manager of Hubbard's Ace Hardware, 335 E. Main St., said the new theater will be an added attraction downtown, he isn't sure that it will help draw more people to the area.

The three-story parking structure planned by the urban renewal agency for Sixth Street and Riverside Avenue will be more of a boon for downtown, he said. Seus said people say they don't come downtown because they can't find parking.

But Phil Cam, president and co-owner of Pacific Diamond at 2 N. Central across from Vogel Park, said he's pleased to see the changes across from his shop.

"I'm sold on the fact that it's really going to do big things for us," he said.