Permanent Home Ready for Summer Circle Theatre

The new outdoor theatre includes three tiers of built-in seating accommodating 400, covered by a rubberized, porous surface that lets rainwater through. All of this surrounds a circular sub-stage with plug-and-play capability.
No one understands the need for a strong cultural community better than Sam Austin, a lifelong physicist and retired University Distinguished Professor at the National Superconducting Cyclotron Laboratory, the home of the FRIB, at Michigan State University.

As long-time supporters of the MSU Department of Theatre in the College of Arts and Letters, Sam and his wife Mary have particularly enjoyed Summer Circle Theatre, the free productions the department stages each summer on the banks of the Red Cedar River.

“It’s so nice to enjoy theatre outside,” said Austin. “It’s an outdoor informal place and one that makes our community a special place.”

The Austins’ love of these productions and their commitment to the community led them to offer help in funding a permanent home for Summer Circle. The idea was endorsed by the late George Peters, former Chair of the Department of Theatre and later, by current Theatre Department Chairperson, Kirk Domer.

Sam and Mary Austin made a lead gift of $300,000 toward the $1.2 million permanent space for Summer Circle Theatre, now located in the courtyard between the Kresge Art Center and the MSU Auditorium building on campus. They are looking forward to watching the first play debut in the new space in June 2015.

The Austins’ leadership is what drove several other former faculty members to support the project, too. Gretel Geist Rutledge, former costume faculty in the Department of Theatre and widow of the late Frank Rutledge; Linda Nelson, retired from the Department of Human and Child Ecology; and Selma Hollander, alumnus of the Department of Art, Art History and Design and widow of the late Stanley Hollander, faculty member in the Eli Broad College of Business, all joined the Austins with major gifts to support the project.

The Friends of Theatre, an organization of community members dedicated to supporting the Department of Theatre, also committed $100,000 to the project.

“Because of Sam and Mary’s leadership, we are almost three quarters of the way done with raising money for this project,” said Domer. “It wouldn’t have happened without them.”

Founded in 1961 by former Department Chair Frank Rutledge, Summer Circle Theatre functions as a summer stock theatre company for MSU students. Originally set in Demonstration Hall, the productions have been staged at various locations on campus, including sites on the banks of the Red Cedar River, which has caused problems with flooding, mosquitoes and accessibility for theatergoers.

The new outdoor theatre includes three tiers of built-in seating accommodating 400, covered by a rubberized, porous surface that lets rainwater through. All of this surrounds a circular sub-stage with plug-and-play capability.

“One of the biggest challenges up until now,” said Austin, 81, an MSU retiree who once headed the cyclotron, “was having to set everything up and tear it back down again each year. Having permanent infrastructure will make it much easier for the students and faculty.”

The new performance/reflection green space will also serve as an arts corridor connecting the arts and performing arts on the MSU campus.

“We anticipate that this space will support lots of student activities,” said Domer. “I expect we’ll see art exhibits, classes, music performances, and all kinds of special events out there.”

“This gift means so much,” said Karin Wurst, then Dean of the College of Arts and Letters.

“We believe that a flourishing cultural environment provides a lifestyle that attracts knowledge workers, entrepreneurs, and businesses. Sam and Mary clearly believe that too, and have helped us ensure that when people come here they will find a strong arts and cultural community.”

“We think this renovation will truly revitalize an underutilized campus asset and will enhance the cultural life of our community,” said Austin. “We’re just happy to be able to help make a difference.”