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## 'This porous rubber O'

MSU's Summer Circle Theatre moves to a new site for 2014

by Lawrence Cosentino

Shakespeare had his "wooden O," the Globe. This summer, MSU's Summer Circle Theatre will clamber out of the Red Cedar floodplain to a spiffy new outdoor venue that will be — cue Sir Anthony Hopkins — "wired for sound and ringed with seats of porous rubber."

The three-tiered \$750,000 plaza, funded by private donors, will start taking shape in the plaza between the former Kresge Art Center and the MSU Auditorium as soon as the snow melts. The theater won't be able to stage "The Tempest" with real floods and freshly hatched riparian mosquitoes anymore, but the tradeoff is probably worth it.

The big push for the project came from MSU alumnus Sam Austin, a physics professor who headed MSU's cyclotron for eight years.

Austin got the idea after attending an outdoor play at Lansing Community College and "seeing how nice their outdoor theater was compared our crummy set-up."

Austin noticed that a lot time and attention was spent on set-ups and teardowns.

"People spent a lot of time doing infrastructure instead of concentrating on the plays themselves," Austin said. MSU Theatre Department Chairman Kirk Domer vigorously seconded that notion.

"The audio and electrical system will be plug and play for evening events," Domer said. "We've never had that for Summer Circle. Now we can focus on creating the art with our students and not the space itself. That's the big thing for me."

Austin and his wife, Mary, have been going to Summer Circle productions for almost 40 years. They've given a lot of support to the arts community over the years and are the lead donors on the Summer Circle project.

"The arts don't always have the same continuing stream of income, outside the university, that the sciences do," Austin said. "Being Depression kids, we've always been frugal, and it seems like an appropriate way to use some of the money we've saved up."

The Austins and other private donors have raised \$650,000 so far. A support group, Friends of Theater at MSU, has committed to raising \$100,000. Domer said he was amazed by donor support, especially from community members who aren't associated with MSU.

Over the years, MSU's summer theater has operated in several places, beginning with Demonstration Hall in 1961.

In the 1970s, the theater moved to the same Kresge Art Center plaza where the new venue will be built this year. The free plays at the plaza, beginning with an adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut short stories, were so popular that wooden risers had to be built. ("The crowds trampled the petunias," crows an official history on the theater's website.)

When the wooden bleachers rotted away, the theater was left with fiberglass bleachers that didn't fit inside the Kresge court.

So the troupe moved its rickety risers and 2-by-4 Forests of Arden to the banks of the Red Cedar River, as deep in the floodplain as you can get, where it stayed until last year.

It was a storybook spot, nestled between the steep banks north of the MSU Auditorium and the river's swampy shallows, but it had its problems — periodic flooding, for one. It was hard for handicapped and older folks to reach, and the mosquitoes were supernumerary.

In 2010, shortly after Summer Circle Theatre celebrated its 50th anniversary, Austin approached MSU's Theatre Department with the idea of creating a landscaped outdoor space for summer theater.

Domer, campus landscape architect Deb Kinney and other MSU officials looked around for a suitable site on campus. They quickly zoomed in on the courtyard between the former Kresge Art Center and the Auditorium.

The venue will center on a circular sub-stage that will support the temporary scenery for each production. Three tiers of built-in seating with an open design, much like LCC's, will be accessible to handicapped patrons and congenial to portable lawn chairs and picnickers.

Domer said the venue will seat over 400, "which is a humongous audience for us" Audiences typically hover between the 250 and 300. A special porous rubber surface will feel warm and soft to the posterior and let rainwater through.

When thespians aren't treading the boards, Domer expects the new venue to host graduations, art projects and other outdoor events.

"Setting the Stage," a fundraising kickoff event, is set for May 7.

The company plans to mount five plays in summer 2014, beginning with a world premiere of "The Summer Circle," written by Rob Roznowski, MSU Theatre Department head of acting and directing. A June start is planned, even though a deep March blanket of snow is inhibiting preliminary work on the plaza.

The Austins look forward to enjoying this summer's plays.

"We grew up in a one-room schoolhouse, and our early arts experience was completely lacking," Austin said. "Maybe when you don't have it as a youth, you appreciate it more as you get older."

Mary Austin hopes the new venue will help Summer Circle take its rightful place among the area's cultural jewels.

"The cyclotron lab has become a real magnet for scientists all over the world," she said. "Scientists are not one-dimensional people. They want to go to a place that has art, music and theater."

