

MPC Theatre Company takes its show on the road this season during massive renovations to main theater

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After being a driving force on the Peninsula theater scene for more than 50 years, it's time for the Monterey Peninsula College Theatre to get a facelift.

In fact, more than a mere cosmetic procedure, the theater will soon undergo a massive and much-needed reconstructive \$7.1 million overhaul that will provide American Disabilities Act retrofitting, as well as modifications to make the theater safer and more comfortable for people in the audience, on stage and behind the wings.

Meanwhile, to continue the high-quality entertainment and education that MPC is known for, the company is going on the road.

"In the end, it's going to be a much more comfortable experience for our patrons and a safer and more user-friendly theatrical experience for us," said Gary Bolen, co-chairman of the Theater Arts Department at MPC. He joked that technical director Dan Beck is still changing the same lights today that he did as a student more than 25 years ago.

However much these improvements are needed, the feat of continuing a full schedule of productions as well as theater arts classes for the next three semesters does not come without challenges. But, as

Bolen would be the first to say, the show must go on.

The road show will begin with MPC's April production of "Grease" at Carmel High School, in conjunction with Carmel High's theater arts program in their new theater.

All Storybook productions will be performed at Carmel Middle School and MPC's summer show

will be co-produced with the Forest Theatre Guild at the outdoor Forest Theater in Carmel.

"It's really logistically complex," said Bolen, citing challenges such as juggling schedules of not only the MPC cast and crew, but the schedules of other institutions with multiple departments competing for space.

In addition, without a tech shop onsite, sets will have to be trucked in. MPC's tech theater program — including shop, machinery and lumber — has already moved to a warehouse in Sand City, where all sets will be prebuilt then disassembled, transported and reassembled wherever they are needed.

"On campus, we would build onstage," Bolen explained. "For example, 'Rent' was a two-level set. Now, everything we build must be able to go outdoors and indoors and be assembled in place. Before a production, everything needs to be put in place — lights, tech, work on cues. Well over a week before the show opens, this needs to be done. We need to be in 10 days before the show."

This means that 10 days prior to the show even opening, the space needs to be free, which must be negotiated in advance with other groups who might be competing for the use of the various venues MPC will be performing in.

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Meanwhile, classes are scheduled to continue on campus at MPC in large portable classrooms.

All rehearsals will be held in portables as well, and a temporary box office will be set up in the college's old handball courts.

"We're going to find a different way of doing our classes for the next year and a half," said Bolen. "It's good; it stretches you, makes you more creative. This group now will be the last group in the theater for the next three semesters."

All this creative challenge should be worth it in the end, added Bolen. Major improvements he listed include the installations of three wheelchair-accessible elevators, new wheelchair-accessible seating and a drop-off area a few feet from the theater entrance.

"Our theater has been a nightmare for people with disabilities to get into," said Bolen. "Right now there is only one wheelchair-accessible seat and people (in wheelchairs) have to come through the back near the dressing rooms. Now they will be able to sit near their companions."

Ease and comfort will benefit everyone in the renovated theater, with plans that include all new "back- and tush-friendly" seating in both the main theater and the Studio Theatre.

The current box office, originally designed as a closet space, will be moved to the site of the current lobby bathroom and will feature outside windows, including a will-call window.

A permanent concessions area will be set up where the box office is now located.

Other improvements include a new ventilation system, remodeled bathrooms, a dust evacuation

system in the tech shop, a new orchestra pit with a hydraulic lift and wheelchair access, new dressing rooms, a new costume shop, reconfigured light and sound systems and sound lock doors that will allow for minimal noise disruption during performances.

"There will be better sightlines and seating and accessibility will be improved," said Bolen. "It's going to be a friendlier experience. The quality of our productions has always been high, but this will make the experience more enjoyable. We're calling ourselves 'the oldest established permanent floating theater in Monterey.' It's going to be a little trickier to find us, but we'll still be offering quality productions and education. That can't stop. We won't let something like a massive renovation stand in our way."

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