Performing the premiere of Jeremy Beck’s comic mini-opera Review at a benefit for the Center for Contemporary Opera in New York was no doubt electrifying for the students of JMU’s opera and music theater program, but the promise of that same electricity awaits the JMU arts community with the opening of the Forbes Center for the Performing Arts this fall.

If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.
The cast of the comic opera *Review* (seated, l-r) are Dorothy Smith, Sarah Davis and Amber McKinney. Standing (l-r) are Andrew Austin, Randall Ball, Megan Steigerwald, Frank Mavilia, Leah Hill, Megan Sill and Mattia D’Affuso. (Not pictured): Sarah Heisler and David Hill.

**While it may not be** an expression typically applied to the realm of opera, 12 James Madison University School of Music students who recently performed in New York found themselves preaching to the choir.

Under the tutelage of JMU Director of Opera and Music Theater Don Rierson, the troupe of five undergraduates and seven graduate students ventured north this semester to stage the contemporary comic opera *Review* at a gala for more than 200 Manhattan intelligentsia. It was sponsored by the prestigious Center for Contemporary Opera.

The setting for Jeremy Beck’s satiric mini-opera is a booze-soaked dinner party, where haughty guests delight in dishing about those not present to defend themselves. Based on a short story written by *Saturday Night Live* scribe Patricia Marx that appeared in *The New Yorker*, it dotes on a theme voiced in the lyric: “The only reason to do anything is to talk about it afterward.”

Ironically, the JMU cast’s audience at Gramercy Park’s posh, historic National Arts Club — oozing regal oak woodwork, splendid crystal chandeliers and Victorian-era charm — could be regarded as the very blue-blooded crowd that *Review* pokes fun of.

Nothing doing. Attendees of the benefit, part of a new Center for Contemporary Opera program designed to introduce opera to a more diverse audience, were high-spirited, filled with judicious laughter and captivated by the youthful vigor and skill that the vocal performance students brought to the big city.

(Inset): Jeremy Beck, opera composer; Patricia Marx, librettist; and Don Rierson, director of JMU opera.
‘Our goals were met’

Jim Schaeffer, general director for CCO, said at a reception after the performance, “This was a great experience for all of us. New York audiences can be critical, and they were delighted with the students. I watched as the cast wiped any trace of cynicism off of these New Yorkers’ faces. Certainly our goals were met: We had the opportunity to reach out to universities with strong music programs and provide a first-class venue for a very talented cast to perform in New York.”

For his part, composer Beck notes, “I couldn’t have been happier. This is as professional a group of students as I’ve seen. The piece was down pat and they had a great time with it.” Among his numerous awards, grants and honors, Beck’s opera The Highway was showcased by the New York City Opera for its Showcasing American Composers series; while the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette cited The Biddle Boys and Mrs. Soffel among 2001’s “Top Ten Cultural Events.”

The invitation to perform for CCO was an honor for JMU, according to Riierson, exposing the professionalism that Madison’s arts programs typically generate to a city renowned for the arts. “It couldn’t be more significant for our program to stage this piece in New York — and we have a fine stable of talent that I’m proud of,” he says. “I think the cast recognized how important it was. They worked hard and had a great time.”

The cast’s spirits no doubt were buoyed by a respectable contingent of NYC alumni in the audience. Review music director Andrew Austin (‘09), who recently returned to JMU for a master’s in music, reveled in performing for an audience that possessed more than a hint of the characters’ aristocratic air: “Here we are in this beautiful building with everyone in their designer clothes; it’s a little different from performing in Wilson Hall. When we walked onstage, we were so prepared, [we felt] united with the audience.”

World class in Harrisonburg

Soon enough, the promise of world-class performances in a first-class venue awaits performers and audiences alike on the Madison campus, with the opening of the new $68 million Forbes Center for the Performing Arts. Classes, rehearsals and performances will begin this fall, with a grand opening celebration in February 2011.

It’s no secret that JMU has succeeded in assembling a first-class academic program in what are admittedly second-rate facilities. The university’s main stage, Latimer-Schaeffer Theatre, which seats just 300, was built in 1967 when the Madison College student body totaled 2,000, while its experimental black box theater was originally a chicken hatchery, constructed in the 1920s.

Located across Main Street from the Quad, the new high-tech Forbes Center comprises two major structures: the Dorothy Thomasen Estes (‘45) Center for Theatre and Dance and the Shirley Hanson Roberts (‘56) Center for Music Performance, uniting faculty offices, rehearsal rooms, smaller performance areas, the black box theater, scene shops, studios, labs and classrooms, along with a main stage theater, a concert hall that seats 600 and a recital hall with a capacity of 200. A plaza between the two structures provides a gateway to the main campus, affirming that creative and liberal arts are a prominent part of JMU’s curriculum.

The 784-space Warsaw Avenue parking deck also makes it easier for the community to take part in performances.

For JMU’s award-winning music, theater, dance, art and art history schools — and the College of Visual and Performing Arts’ 1,000 students pursuing B.A., M.M. and D.M.A. degrees — the Forbes Center will “allow us to render production values of equal quality to our performances,” says George Sparks, dean of the college. “We have always set a high standard with the breadth and distinction of opportunities offered to students, and now we can create an entire social experience from the arts. When someone walks in the door, we want to craft an experience where they have a place to talk, eat or drink, and to enjoy the atmosphere of the center after the performance.”

“We intend for the Forbes Center to become part of the social fabric of the Shenandoah Valley,” Sparks adds. “Sociologists have found that when people in smaller communities are surrounded by the arts, they feel better about where they live — even if they don’t necessarily attend. We hope to make life better for everyone.”

Building a reputation

Riierson notes that the center will also bring more exposure to JMU than previously possible: “With the arts community’s first state-of-the-art facility, we can invite important figures and academics in modern music and theater. It will do wonders for our reputation on a national scale. I can’t underestimate its value.”

JMU’s Masterpiece Season has already packed houses during spring semester 2010, with its guest Encore Series, which featured the River North Chicago Dance Co., in January; Cirque D’or, presented by the Golden Dragon Acrobats, in February; and the Grammy-nominated Imani Winds Quintet in March. Madison’s theater department staged Oklahoma! in February, which sold out all six shows; while in March, the Contemporary Dance Ensemble showcased JMU students, professors and guest
Beginning this fall, the Forbes Center will enable sophisticated production values on par with the performances for which the College of Visual and Performing Arts has long been known.

Artist Faye Driscoll from New York. Music offerings included the Jazz Ensemble’s big band concert and the Honors Symphony Orchestra featuring JMU School of Music Concerto Competition winners. Meanwhile, Madison’s Experimental Theatre staged Nine and Red Light Winter.

Mattia D’Affuso, a freshman from Torino, Italy, pursuing a double degree in vocal performance and Italian — one of the cast members in Review at New York’s Center for Contemporary Opera event — says that the promise of the Forbes Center was a major draw when he decided to study at JMU. “My father took an embassy job in Washington in 2003, and as we were looking for schools in the area, JMU was definitely the best choice,” he says. “The people are so nice and the city is gorgeous. I’ve found it to be a very welcoming environment. While our facilities are modest now, we’re all looking forward to the opportunities a major venue will provide to express ourselves.”

Renowned international set designer Richard Finkelstein, a professor in JMU’s School of Theatre and Dance, believes the center “will have a massive and multidimensional impact on the experience for our theater students. For the first time, we will all be together — students and faculty, dance, music and theater — so there should be an amazing expansion of collaborative work and projects. This will be very exciting and a big deal for us.”

Finkelstein points to specific advantages of the new facilities, like sloped seating, which previously had to be temporarily constructed. This will simplify issues of safety, as will extensive catwalk systems, better ventilation and dust collection systems, while adding economy of scale, thanks to dedicated, permanent spaces. “The new main theater can be configured into different audience-stage relationships, expanding the repertoire of experiences by both performers and designers,” he explains. “And greatly enhanced storage space for props and costumes will allow us to better reuse our creations.”

Currently, for example, a single stage might be utilized for scenery construction, rehearsals, lighting, choreography and performance. “In the new building, construction and painting have their own spaces and are sound-isolated from the stage. This means we can greatly expand the scope and quality of our stage design work — and students trained in scenic art are much more in demand than those with more limited training. There are also better rehearsal spaces so it will be possible to do more shows on the stage of a higher caliber,” Finkelstein says.

On the technology side, he adds, “So much of design is now computer-based, and our current labs could not accommodate even basic software. The new design lab will be fitted with current hardware and software for imaging. The new spaces will also be better equipped to deal with live video components of production.”

Kate Arecchi, musical theater professor, notes, “We are lucky to attract very high quality talent to JMU. This has been true even with our current facilities. Both the dance and musical theater concentrations have seen huge growth this year in the number of students auditioning for the programs — and I think the new performing arts center had a huge hand in that increase.”

For the dance program, she says the Forbes Center’s new performance and additional studios will allow professors to increase class offerings. “This will serve all of the majors in the School of Theatre and Dance and the School of Music. More classes will ensure that more students will be accommodated. Dance is a huge part of musical theater performance, so the additional curriculum will prepare them for the professional world, where musical theater performers are expected to be a ‘tripple threat.’”

In addition, Arecchi notes, the enhanced space “will attract more guest artists to work with dance students, setting pieces with them and helping them make real-world connections.”

Leah Hill, a graduate student seeking her master’s in music, sees the best of both worlds at Madison: a smaller environment that offers more advantages for learning and experience. “Because of the size of JMU’s program, we have so many opportunities to perform, which at a large conservatory wouldn’t be possible.” The Forbes Center, she agrees, will up the ante. “We have some obstacles now with acoustics and a single space where we can focus on all of our needs. I know this big, beautiful new complex will provide pride for the school, while attracting people from all over the region to our arts events.”

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