

# A Grand Revival

First nighters and performers alike were dazzled by the new Donald W. Reynolds Center, which preserves the look and the traditions of the venerable Holmberg Hall.

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

Photos by Robert Taylor

**O**n an early April evening, the newly minted—yet somehow familiar—concert hall on the University of Oklahoma campus was abuzz with that particular brand of electricity generated on the eve of a momentous event. Humming like atoms, patrons of the performing arts murmured appreciably, taking in the vintage theater seats, the towering proscenium arches, the red velvet curtains spilling into lush pools on the black stage.

As if controlled by a single switch, house lights and voices faded in unison as the overture to *Candide* rose from the orchestra pit. When the OU Symphony launched into a Bach concerto and the grand drape parted to reveal eight ballerinas in white gossamer against a sea of cobalt blue, a round of goose bumps so prevalent they were almost audible swept through the crowd. A new era for an OU icon had begun.

Combining the latest technical equipment with the ambience of a turn-of-the-century European concert hall, the Donald W. Reynolds Performing Arts Center offers the best of both worlds to performers and audience alike. Funded with a \$12.2 million grant from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation of Las Vegas, Nevada, and another \$5.8 million in University funding, the new facility preserves the grace and beauty of historic Holmberg Hall, while renovating practice rooms, updating the stage house and providing 20,000 square feet of space to the OU School of Dance.

Built in 1918, Holmberg Hall had played host to a parade of international celebrities such as Louis Armstrong, Aaron Copland, Martha Graham and Isaac Stern.

But more than that, the hall had given Oklahomans a

community gathering place like no other in the state. It was the site for commencements, gubernatorial debates and community events from Sooner Scandals to the Cimarron Circuit Opera Company. Long before Catlett Music Center and Rupel Jones Theater, Holmberg Hall was *the* performing arts space on the OU campus.

Yet, as with any entity approaching its 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, Holmberg Hall was showing its age. The configuration and size of the stage, coupled with outdated sound and lighting systems, limited performance options. In recent years, the stage crews would not even attempt to open and close the aging curtains, which were eventually removed altogether. And there were other, more immediate concerns.

The University's nationally ranked School of Dance had no place to call home. The department was founded in 1961 when Miguel Terekhov and Yvonne Chouteau, principal dancers with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, came to OU as guest artists. Energized by the talent and potential of the students, the couple stayed to develop the present program, which quickly rose to national prominence.

Perhaps because of its spontaneous birth and subsequent growth, the School of Dance never had enjoyed a "room of one's own." Students and professors were tucked into spaces here and there, borrowing from drama and other departments. With existing programs blossoming and a new musical theater program taking root, it was apparent that Fine Arts was rapidly running out of room.

Restoring and modernizing the venerable performance hall had been a longtime dream of OU President David L. Boren. As a



The Donald W. Reynolds Performing Arts Center maintains the look and feel of a turn-of-the-century European opera house, while adding state-of-the-art technology. A likeness of former Fine Arts Dean Fredrik Holmberg looks down from his niche high above the front doors, while a sculpture of newspaper magnate Donald W. Reynolds greets visitors on their way into the performance hall.





Murals in the front lobby of the Reynolds Center pay loving tribute to Fredrik Holmberg, OU's first dean of Fine Arts. Holmberg is featured in the center of the mural, holding his violin and surrounded by the orchestra he created and nurtured throughout his 30 years at the University. Notable visitors to Holmberg Hall, such as Martha Graham and Aaron Copland, can be seen in the background.

Seminole High School student in the 1950s, he played saxophone there with the All-State Band, and in 1994, as a U.S. Senator, he announced from that same stage that he would be leaving Washington to become OU's 13<sup>th</sup> president. To demolish the facility would have been akin to tearing a page out of Oklahoma history. But renovating and expanding the facility was an expensive proposition that required a "white knight of a donor," says Robyn Tower, assistant vice president for development, who coordinated the proposal asking the Reynolds Foundation to consider an extraordinary, multi-million-dollar gift.

When it came time to present the OU proposal to the foundation, Boren himself went before the board. In less than 18 minutes, the graduate of OU law school built a compelling case weaving together the building's unique place in Oklahoma history with its potential to enrich the future of the state.

In August 2001, the Reynolds Foundation announced the \$12.2 million grant to create the Donald W. Reynolds Performing Arts Center at the University of Oklahoma. An additional \$2.5 million was raised through the Commitment of Fifty campaign, in which 50 generous OU supporters contributed \$50,000 each to endow a building maintenance fund required by the grant.

"The renovation and expansion of historic Holmberg Hall has been a long-held dream," says Boren, "but the reality of this beautiful facility exceeded even my expectations. It is truly an extraordinary place for our students and for all Oklahomans."

The new facility includes 50 upgraded music practice rooms, which are filled with students from morning till far into the night. The School of Dance has an entire three-story wing to call its own, complete with offices, a media center, Pilates studio and three 43-by-63-foot practice rooms with basket weave subsurface and Cascade dance linoleum. The studio on the third floor has theatrical lighting, audio/visual equipment and a 17-foot ceiling so dancers can practice leaps and lifts with joyful abandon.

One dancer already doing grand jetés over the new facility is Mary Margaret Holt, director of the School of Dance and holder

of the John W. and Mary D. Nichols Chair in Dance. Since coming to OU in 1980, Holt has taught every course in the ballet curriculum; led OU's ballet company, Oklahoma Festival Ballet, on five international tours; choreographed more than 20 ballets, musicals and operas; and served as associate dean and interim dean of the College of Fine Arts.

"It is wonderful after years of dreaming and planning to have a facility like this," says Holt. "Yvonne and Miguel gave us our past. This building gives us our future."

Designed to enhance performances from opera to the symphony, the hall is an instrument in itself. From the layers of curtains onstage to the panels around the room, fabrics can be positioned to influence sound. The dramatic domed ceiling is not actually a dome at all, but rings of concentric circles, like the layers of a wedding cake. Sound travels through the circles of steel latticework and is absorbed by fabric inside instead of bouncing back, muddying the sound.

The hall boasts near perfect acoustics for the human voice 1.7 second reverberation time—making it the ideal venue for opera. The taller proscenium arches allow sound to travel more efficiently into the audience, so performers can move about the stage more freely and still be heard from the back row. "I'm overjoyed," says William Ferrara, director of the opera program. "We finally have given our students the setting they deserve."

Thanks to several technical and mechanical upgrades, life is as much improved for those who work behind the curtain as for those in front of it. A new, single purchase stage-rigging system allows stage hands to raise and lower heavy set pieces with ease. In the old hall, crews had to hoist set pieces manually using only muscle and a hemp rope, which greatly restricted the size and weight of the scenery.

"What we had before was primitive compared to this," says John Fowler, manager of both Reynolds hall and opera production for the School of Music. "Both the lighting and sound systems are greatly improved. Technologically, we are now geared for any new updates out there. This system will not be obsolete for a long time to come."



Cushioned floors, higher ceilings and an abundance of natural light are just a few of the amenities dance students enjoy in their new practice facilities. From left, David Barocio, LizAnne Roman, Dennis Adams, Holly Holmes and Bruce Snead warm up at the barre before class.

Fowler, who knows the hall intimately from the catwalks above the dome to the depths of the orchestra pit, is quick to point out the many amenities of the new performance center.

“The old hall did not have a fly space,” he explains. “You could hang things from the battens, but you could not fly them in and out. It was much harder to make scenery changes. This will give set designers more flexibility.”

Another new feature is the super-title screen above the stage, where subtitles for opera can be projected, and the orchestra pit lift, which lowers the musicians below stage level, so patrons no longer have to peer through a forest of bows to see the action onstage.

Students who performed at Holmberg in the past will appreciate another first for the center—the addition of dressing rooms. “Well, there was actually *one* dressing room,” admits Fowler, “but its only entrance was from outside the building. Since performers would have to get dressed, then come in through the front door, it has long been used as a storage space.”

Now there are two spacious

dressing rooms with mirrors and seating for 16, including a restroom and shower area. Principals get their own rooms, complete with grand pianos for warming up before performances. There is also a costume shop and opera classroom.

Although the acoustics and technological advances inside the hall are definitely 21<sup>st</sup> century, a trio of murals in the lobby pays loving tribute to the past. Front and center in the largest of the three panels is Fredrik Holmberg, who served as the first dean of the School of Fine Arts, from 1910-1937. In the mural, he poses with violin and bow, surrounded by his orchestra and artists who performed over the years in the hall that bears his name.

The murals and other special art for the building were funded by the Reynolds Foundation, says Tower, who noted that it was very important to the Reynolds trustees and to President Boren



Fostering an atmosphere of camaraderie and “cross-pollination” between departments was a goal of centralizing practice facilities for students in art, dance and music. A winding path, umbrella tables and a sculpture garden welcome students and visitors to a cozy conversation spot between the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art and the new performing arts center.



that the new facility pay homage to Dean Holmberg and the hall's illustrious past.

Oklahoma artist Mike Larsen, who designed the murals in the rotunda of the state capitol, worked from photographs of notables who appeared at Holmberg Hall, from pianist Van Cliburn to President William Howard Taft. Larsen also painted murals in the lobby of the School of Dance, which feature scenes from modern dance to classical ballet. In the center panel are School of Dance founders Terekhov and Chouteau in a pose from the 1966 OU production of *Giselle*.

"My studio in Oklahoma City was near their home," says Larsen. "Yvonne would often drop by with a bag of Fritos, and we would gorge ourselves and work on the murals. She was my technical adviser."

In addition to the murals inside, public art spaces have been



OU School of Dance founders Miguel Terekhov and Yvonne Chouteau are captured in a scene from the 1966 OU production of *Giselle*. The mural, painted by Oklahoma artist Mike Larsen from a photograph in the OU archives, is Chouteau's favorite pose of the couple. INSET: Terekhov and Chouteau were among the celebrity guests at the Reynolds Center opening in April.



Taller proscenium arches, a larger stage and new lighting and sound systems improve the quality of productions for both performers and audience. The Reynolds Center offers the latest in technological advances while preserving the grace and charm of the former Holmberg Hall.



Kasey Allee-Foreman puts the finishing touches on costumes for the Fall 2005 production of *La Traviata*. For the first time in OU history, the opera program has its own costume shop, complete with designer and seamstress.

ments that will lead to a “cross-pollinating” of ideas and disciplines. The hall already has proved a source of inspiration for the young artists who have performed there.

“To be able to perform at the opening, to be part of so much history, was great,” says David Barocio, a dance major from La Habra, California. “The hall is so elegant. It’s like dancing in a New York theater.”

“It’s a wonderful place to sing,” adds Christian Morren, a graduate student in voice from Phoenix, Arizona, who will play Violetta in the School of Music’s production of *La Traviata* this fall. “It’s all state-of-the-art, but the charm and integrity of the old Holmberg are still there.”

Morren is one of several voice majors who have had the pleasure of taking classes at OU from opera star Marilyn Horne, who for 26 years was a leading lady with the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Horne, who teaches master classes twice a year, returned to Norman in April to share billing with OU students for the opening night performance.

Although the program listed Horne as a soloist, students who were listening carefully may have heard a duet. As the legendary mezzo-soprano mesmerized the audience with American classics, the great hall, with its rich history and bright future, underscored her voice with a promise to young performers: “Here is proof that dreams come true. Test your wings, and we will help you soar!”

(See “Fredrik Holmberg’s Legacy,” Page 10.)

created outside the facility. OU First Lady Molly Shi Boren, whose passion for landscaping has transformed OU campuses from Norman to Oklahoma City and Tulsa, had a vision for creating two plazas, one by the entrance to the hall and the other in front of the School of Dance. The Reynolds Foundation provided funding for two outdoor sculptures—*Pastoral Dreamer*, a larger than life-size figurative work by Oklahoma artist David Phelps, and a dancer by OU graduate student Kim Walker, which graces the top of a fountain on the south side of the building.

Administrators in the College of Fine Arts say they hope the plazas will become an intellectual and social gathering place for students from all depart-



The legendary mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne delighted the audience with her performance during opening night festivities. The hall boasts near perfect acoustics for the human voice, making it an ideal venue for the former leading lady with the Metropolitan Opera.