

CH:6 NORTHWEST SIDE STORY: There's a (New) Place for Us



IN THIS CHAPTER

Armory construction and rehearsals for Portland's new cultural center's first production, *West Side Story*, race to the finish line. What does it all mean for Portland Center Stage, the world of theater, this city, and sustainability in America? More importantly, how is opening night?

THE MAGIC WAND

It is late summer, 2006, and we're in the final weeks before the building opens. As I write, it is one day before rehearsals begin for *West Side Story*. Nineteen actors arrived from New York last night, and they'll join their five local counterparts to begin learning that amazing Bernstein score in the morning. And I can't quite make it real yet. In a month people are going to finally inhabit this building again and breathe life into a space that has been "theory" for so very long. It feels wonderfully surreal.

It is difficult to conceive of how great a distance we have traveled.

I love to stand on NW 10th Avenue and watch passersby stop, look up and try to read the original insignia on the building's face. Cleaning up the exterior has made it possible to read the detail, and people stop and form the words aloud, "National Guards."

From the greenroom that is carved from a turret on NW 11th Avenue and Davis Street — you can see where the concrete floor met the wall three years ago: but who knew that entire worlds would appear both above and below that slab? Twenty-seven feet below the street that carries the streetcar buzzing past, there now appears a studio theater that will open with *I Am My Own Wife* in two months. Up near the rafters, which once seemed miles away, our IT guys are



AN OPEN DOOR

Honoring Past Lives

I've devoted many years to serving Native American and low-income communities, making sure the voices of color and/or the poor are remembered in venues they do not frequent. I feel I can speak with certainty about the emotional power and sense of pride people have for their neighborhoods — the older buildings, the streets and parks our families have enjoyed for generations. • For me, being born at Good Samaritan Hospital (in the newly added Wilcox Maternity Unit) and then twenty years later giving birth to my first child at the same hospital are especially important events that tie me to this neighborhood. Both births were performed by the same doctor — Dr. Elizabeth French — in the same Wilcox Unit. • The Armory is another resonant symbol; as a child, I remember passing the building many times when going to see my grandmother — who like many elders on limited income lived in the low-rent, old hotels. Northwest Portland was one of the most affordable areas for those in need, particularly the elderly. • At the age of 15, I began my working life living in a series of those affordable hotels and apartments close to my jobs. When walking downtown I passed the Armory many times. Others have reminisced about the Armory, telling me it was just about the only place in town that could hold large events indoors. In the early years the Armory was one of the only places people of color and younger crowds could attend concerts or cultural events. • My best friend recounts memories of her brother, Willard 'Battling' Nelson (aka Harold Penland), whom she remembers was the first local Native American boxer. The light-weight boxed a few times at the Armory between 1955 to 1959. My father spoke proudly about watching

and meeting this young boxer. • Progress is always good for a thriving city; so is recognition of all the different kinds of people who live here now and those who came before us. The Pearl District is an entirely different neighborhood than it used to be. This change has been rapid and to some, scary. Honoring the history of a new cultural center restores balance. The new Armory is a place where *the doors will be open* for everybody for years to come. This simple statement is a most generous gesture to honor our people and those who have walked before us. I believe there are many spirits who are pleased to know the Armory building will be preserved and that it will be a space for the community to gather and enjoy the memories of days gone by as well as a place where new memories can be made.

ARMORY VOICES:
Community

JULIE METCALF
KINNEY

Julie Metcalf Kinney is a long-time community activist who served as Board Chair and then Executive Director for the Native American Community Development Corporation LIHNAPO (Low Income Housing for Native Americans in Portland, Oregon). She was on PDC's Urban Renewal Advisory Committee for the Interstate Max line and the Advisory Committee for the Portland Armory.

Magic Wand *continued*

installing phone lines and computer cable in the administrative offices while staff is moving in.

Heated and cooled by water-filled beams, the offices have carpets of recycled old carpets and sound absorption materials of recycled pop bottles. The desks are among the trusses, a conference room overlooks the lobby, and skylights — 41 to be exact — are everywhere. The rehearsal space is right in the middle of it all. It's an evocative work environment — evocative of things both grand and humble, all resolutely human and distinctly Northwest: industry and workaday routines, an overt respect for the elements, history and our limited place in it, art — those soaring trusses — and what it does for us, and the curative cast of natural light.

I like to sit in the mainstage theater. Just sit there and drink in how much better the sightlines are between the beautiful panels of recycled Douglas Fir on the walls, and how much leg room you have. The scale of the proscenium opening feels perfect: big enough for *West Side Story* but not too big for



THE NEW IN THE OLD

A Portland Landmark is Reborn

It used to be that historic and contemporary architecture were mutually exclusive. Sometimes we preserved old structures, with their enduring forms and memories of place. Where would London be without Westminster Abbey, or Egypt without the Pyramids? Other times architecture has sought new design frontiers with cutting-edge materials and methods, from the sleek midcentury modernism of Mies Van Der Rohe and Richard Neutra to today's revolution in sustainability. • The Gerding Theater at the Armory represents a third way, where old and new have come together to make a building that respects the past but lives for the future. • Visit the former Portland Armory today and you'll find this massive edifice of brick and wood is looking better than it has in more than a century. From the structural integrity of its soaring ceiling rafters to the freshly sandblasted façade, what was once a decaying old shell of its younger days is now a landmark reborn. • At the same time, although great attention has been paid to restoring the integrity of its original construction, the objective was not to make a new Armory. Rather, the Gerding Theater is a performance space and a cultural gathering place. And in so doing, the architects have nestled a striking example of contemporary architecture inside its historic envelope. There are two distinct portions of the Armory, even as they fit together like a hand in a glove. • This hybrid of old and new is also indicative of our time. Think of architect Sir Norman Foster's glass canopy over the Great Court at London's British Museum and his Hearst Building in Manhattan. Or the new Moynihan Station planned for New York City, with the old James Farley Post Office transformed into a new train station by the firms Skidmore Owings Merrill and Hellmuth, Obata + Kassabaum. In both cases, historic architecture is the foundation

from which a 21st century building rises, not deferentially, but with pride and harmony. The Gerding Theater is no different. Or maybe it is, because this project also boasts the latest advances in sustainable design and construction, enough to earn a coveted LEED Platinum rating from the US Green Building Council. • And while it will make an ideal home for Portland Center Stage's many theatrical productions, the Gerding Theater also represents new thinking in arts facilities by acting as a cultural beacon even when the curtain is down. From its delightful Vera Katz Park to the multi-story lobby, the Gerding Theater at the Armory is a place where people can congregate day and night. The facility opens to and connects with its community not just as a theater but also as a place to hang out. Much as we can take pride in this stately historic local landmark, we can also come to know it as a familiar friend.

ARMORY VOICES:
Design

BRIAN
LIBBY



Brian Libby is a freelance writer and photographer living in Portland. He has previously written for the *New York Times*, *The Oregonian*, *the Christian Science Monitor*, among numerous publications.

Magic Wand *continued*

Pillowman. And most importantly — the furnishings are handsome, but not too eager for attention. So once the show starts, the show will be the star.

I like to stand with my arms leaning against the mezzanine rail and imagine what it will be like to watch audiences move through the space. To walk through the offices and watch the lights automatically decide to turn on when I appear, as if by magic. In the lobby I run my hand over the arch that was reconstructed by hand over the doorway to the main entrance and turn around to view the grand staircase that swoops down from the mezzanine, and catch the authenticity of those original brick walls, juxtaposed against great sheets of glass against steel against old growth timber. It takes my breath away every time I walk into the space.

Second Story has set up interactive theater guides next to the box office — two 40” touch-screens with dedicated speakers that only the user can hear. Another high-definition touch screen features discussions from some of Portland’s leading minds on historic preservation and sustainable design. And there’s another Second Story production — a huge “Historiscope” — an old-timey raree cabinet in the shape of the Armory that people can peep into to learn about the history of the building. All digital of course, but with a historic feel – entertaining and painlessly educational.

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Chris Coleman

VICTORIA
BLAKE



Victoria Blake is a fiction writer and book editor for M Press/DH Press, the prose division of Dark Horse Comics.

BOOTS AND THE CITY

A Portland Armory Play Date

I have a friend who wore cowboy boots to the theater.

- The friend is a poet, this was in New York, and he did it to pick up women. It was part of his look, along with the flowing, wide-collar white shirt, the tight jeans, and the pleasingly unruly hair. From his own account of this stage in his life, it worked.

- I asked him to take me to the theater one time, so I could see him in action.

- “It’s more than the boots,” he warned in the taxi heading downtown.

- “Really?”

- “Sure. Boots are nothing. Boots are boots,” he said, picking up one booted foot and wiggling it in the air. The boots were beautiful, grey and black reptile skin of some sort, purchased on one of his poetic trips to South America.

- “Go on,” I said, curious.

- “It’s knowing the place,” he replied. “It’s having a plan.”

- The taxi pulled up outside the theater, which advertised the play we were to see on a long, flapping marquee outside. It was still light, the blue, white light of summer, and I was sweating through the arm pits of my inconspicuous shirt.

- My friend, I noticed as he raised his arm to point across the street, wasn’t sweating. That was part of

the look, too. Calm and collected. A poet with a plan.

- “See that door?” he asked.

- I nodded.

- “Post-theater drinks,” he said, obviously pleased with himself. “The lighting is fantastic. Then, if she’s hungry, over there.” His arm swung around, as if it were a crane, and pointed to another door down the block. I squinted, then nodded, unsure of where, exactly, he was pointing.

- He went on, explaining that the boots worked to catch a woman’s interest, but the important part — the cincher — was to know where to take the woman after the play let out. Success, in my friend’s mind, was measured not in the agreement to travel back uptown, but in the first step out of the theater, the moment he could take the stranger’s elbow and lead her confidently down the block to a place he knew well, to a place he had taken other women before. Places have their own magic, he told me. It’s just a matter of knowing where to go.

- That night, I hovered at a safe distance, pretending to read my Playbill, and watched as he scanned the milling crowd. When, after the event was through, he walked outside, I followed. I put my hand on his elbow and led him down the block.

- “Another play,” he said. “Another time.”

This friend came to visit me a couple months ago, years after we had both left New York. I took him to our own downtown. As every Portlander does, I took him to see the Pearl where Powell’s City of Books and Whole Foods are neighbors and gelato is just a stone’s throw away.

- I pointed out the Armory building with a touch of pride.

- “The new home of Portland Center Stage,” I bragged.

- “Really?” he asked, interested.

- “See that door,” I said, pointing down the block. “Pre-theater pinot. See that, over there?” I asked, my arm swinging on its hinge. “Afterward, post-theater books.”

- He smiled the charming, boyish smile of his, the one that used to work so well.

- “I brought my boots,” he said.



A SLIVER OF PARADISE

Portland's Most Inviting Sidewalk



This passage is Murase's "blueprint" for the Armory's adjoining park, recently named the Vera Katz Park (previously referred to as Sliver Park). It describes both the materials and the concepts of his design.

Passage Movement
Urban People Spaces Gatherings
Conversations Sounds Surprise
Green

Expression of Landscape Articulation

Materiality Craft
Attention to Detail

Stone Walls/Seating
Smooth Chiseled Carved
Light/Dark Wet/Dry

Water Source

Stormwater
Flow Fall Sounds
Channels

Celebrations!



ARMORY VOICES:
Design

SCOTT
MURASE

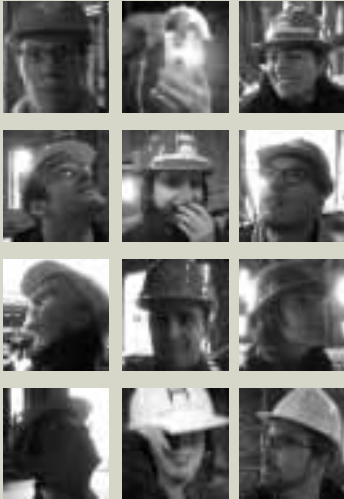


Scott Murase is Principal of Murase Associates, which provides landscape architecture, urban design and public art services to a wide variety of public and private clients. With studios in Portland and Seattle, the firm has designed many projects that have contributed to the Pacific Northwest's spirit of place, gaining a reputation for creating high-quality designs that are sensitive to detail and material use, appropriate to place, and striking in visual form.



ARMORY VOICES:
Culture

WIEDEN+
KENNEDY 12



**Wieden+Kennedy 12
is an experiment
disguised as an advertising
school housed in the
Wieden +Kennedy
headquarters in
Portland, Oregon, USA.**

12 TOURS THE ARMORY

A One-Act Play on Design

CALEB

People were jealous when I told them about our tour.

TIM

I miss being onstage.

JELLY

Sustainable building design looks a lot harder than advertising.

JEREMY

I'd like to meet the person who tightened the bolts on those wooden trusses.

KELLY

Portland is a very thoughtful city.

SASHA

I hope James Brown gets down here again.

PHILIP

I used to peek in the windows.

KATIE

It's precise/messy,
complicated/simple.

PATRICK

I'm not into hippies, but sustainable architecture is cool.

LOREN

I want to flush a recycled rainwater toilet.

JOE

"Sliver" Park? Come on.

ELISA

I wonder what it will smell like.

Magic Wand *continued*

You can't help but look up. The elliptical mezzanine aperture frames the view of the glorious trusses and gives you a sweeping vantage point of the building from the floor to the ceiling. The donor wall will be installed on the mezzanine in the next few days — a light sculpture that projects donors' names on glass through a software algorithm.

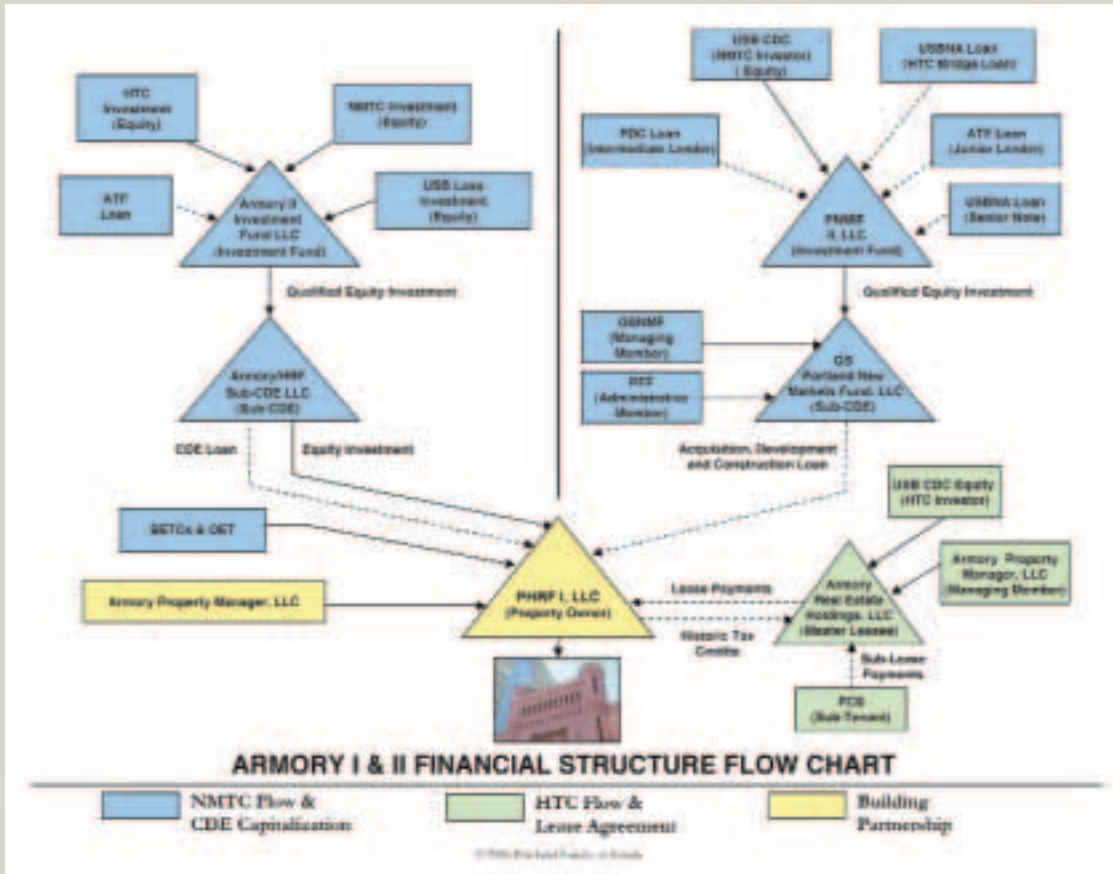
Not too long from now the firewall — a 25' tall sculpture of 70 hand-cast, amber-colored illuminated, bullseye glass squares will be installed. Created by John Tess — the same guy who helped us get the historic tax credits for the building — the massive wall will glow like votive candles in a big cathedral. A huge, three-tiered chandelier, designed by Nancy Keystone and Peter Maradudin, is being installed in the next weeks like a star field above the floor. The Sliver Park — recently named Vera Katz Park — alongside Davis Street will be completed in December, green in the old and new sense. The trusses are lit, the Todd Oldham chairs arrive any day and the marquee is in place.



FUNDING SOURCES:

ARMORY VOICES:
Development

Mapping the Armory Revenue Streams



The Gerding Theater at the Armory was one of the first New Markets Tax Credits (NMTC) projects in the United States to utilize a leveraged financing structure, enabled by IRS ruling 2003-20, 2003-7 I.R.B. 465 of 2002. The initial transaction, which closed in April, 2004, included tax credits from GS New Markets Fund, 20% Historic Tax Credits, NMTC equity investment, and a loan by the Portland Development Commission. A second infusion of capital was achieved in December, 2005 in response to community desires for the lobby space and the highest levels of sustainable design, through tax credits from Historic Rehabilitation Fund, Oregon Business Energy Tax Credits, and tax credit equity investment.



Magic Wand *continued*

I walk outside, turn the corner and look up. No pigeons in sight. OK, I lied. Two pigeons seem to have found a way to nestle into a little cubbyhole on the building's exterior that faces 10th Avenue. A sign? A blessing? A link, and a humble one at that, between past and future. This building has been a military training facility, a wrestling rink, an orchestra concert hall, a brewery and an empty, cavernous warehouse. It has hosted the First Regiment militia, track athletes, opera singers, presidents, circus animals, basketball teams, blues singers, wrestlers, skateboarders, sheepdogs, the jobless, championship tennis players, academy-award-winning actors, financiers and mayors.

For 115 years, the Armory has been many different things to many different people.

But to pigeons it's all the same.

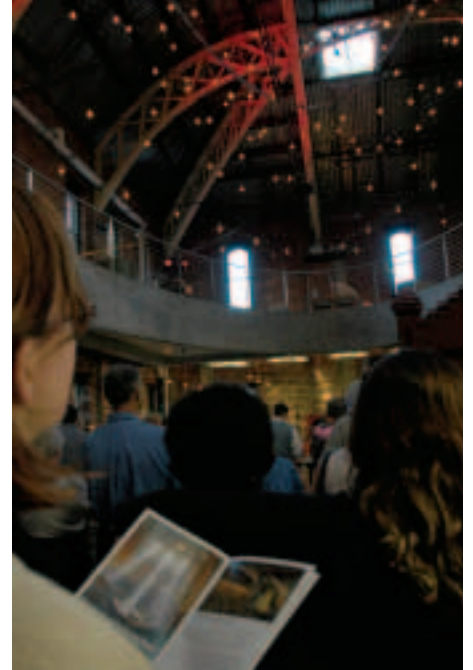
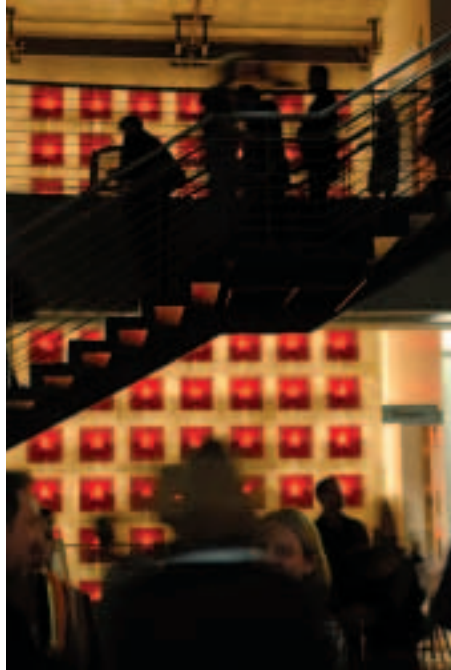
It's all theater.



I'VE SPOKEN TO HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE ABOUT THIS PROJECT, AND IT RESONATES ON SO MANY LEVELS TO SO MANY DIFFERENT GROUPS. IN THE BEGINNING, I WAS SURPRISED BY THE INCREDIBLE ENERGY AND SUPPORT REFLECTED BACK AFTER TELLING OUR STORY. THEATER PEOPLE, PHILANTHROPISTS, BUSINESS PEOPLE, POLITICAL LEADERS, AND PEOPLE I MEET CASUALLY ALL WANT TO HEAR MORE. THOSE FROM NEW YORK, KANSAS CITY, LOS ANGELES, SEATTLE AND OTHER CITIES WANT TO KNOW HOW WE'VE DONE IT; THEY WANT TO DO THE SAME THING. AND WHEN I SHARE *THOSE* STORIES WITH THE PORTLAND COMMUNITY, PEOPLE HERE REALIZE HOW IMPORTANT IT IS TO SUPPORT THIS PROJECT. THIS WAS A GIFT TO OUR CITY THAT ALL SHOULD HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE PART OF AS FUNDERS, BENEFACTORS, AND ULTIMATELY ATTENDEES.

Julie Vigeland. Chair, Armory Theater Fund





OPENING WEEK

Tuesday, September 26, 2006: the first night I saw the public walk into the lobby of the Armory. I was standing on the balcony of the administrative offices leaning over the rail with (Patrick) Spike and Marty (Thompson) — our brilliant IT guys. The evening was an invited dress rehearsal for staff, volunteers and friends, and it was just so amazing to see the space begin to come to life as people walked in and gaped up at the chandelier (installed hours earlier) and the cleaned up trusses.

Wednesday evening we hosted the firms who built the building. I loved hearing from one steelworker who had built dozens of buildings in Portland but had never actually been invited back to see them in action. He wanted more tickets so he could bring his buddies back to see *West Side Story*.

Thursday mid-morning, Bob and I ran into each other in the lobby. It was our first time in the nearly completed building together. He hugged me, and neither of us could say much. I don't know that either of us knew if we would ever actually get to this moment. So we just stood there and soaked it in. It was an overwhelming experience to stand in a building in which each of us had invested so much of our hearts and souls, and to realize that it was going to surpass our imaginings.

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Chris Coleman

Opening Week *continued*

Saturday morning, *The Oregonian's* lead editorial ran with the headline: "Armory Renovation the City at its Best." It was an astonishing affirmation of the project's larger potential for impact and for the weaving of community, art, history and sustainability into one beautiful package.

Saturday evening, we closed off Couch Street behind Powell's Books and stretched long banquet tables out for the gala fundraising celebration. The tables were inspired by a photograph from a community celebration held in the Armory circa 1911. With an absolutely perfect September night holding rain at bay, it was hard to complain. Teddy Roosevelt (aka Keith McCough, looking terrific for a 150 year old) even showed up to offer the crowd an exhortation to action.

All 600 guests walked over to the building and had a chance to explore before we performed excerpts from the show. People were so honestly excited by the feel of the building, the combination of history and future represented, and by the warmth and sexiness of the





Opening Week *continued*

design. I think that perhaps the most gratifying comments came from Roger Cooke and Bob Van Brocklin, who had been PCS board members in the early days of the theater's life. Roger said: "Did you ever in your wildest dreams think that PCS would pull something like this off?" Bob said, "Not a chance. Not a chance in hell. But it's just so clear that this thing is going to succeed. It is amazing."

And then on Sunday we invited the community down for a big block party, with musical performances on an outdoor stage and booths lining Davis Street. We offered ticketed tours through the building and were sold out by 3:00 pm. Visitors were focused on the building's design and interactive "toys." (I noticed one father try to distract his nine-year-old son from the "Historiscope." Every time he pulled him away, the boy got back in line again.) By the end of the day, we had shown 5,000 people through the new building and the box office had done \$35,000 of business (\$10,000 is a banner day for Center Stage). By opening night, *West Side Story* had officially sold more tickets than any show in the theater's history.

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Chris Coleman





Opening Week *continued*

Friday, October 6, 2006: Opening Night. After a week and a half of previews, you'd think that I would have relaxed, but I was still wired for sound. The combination of exhaustion and excitement had sent my obsessive-compulsive tendencies into high gear.

For me the evening began with a dinner in the newly inaugurated "Julie Vigeland Rehearsal Hall," with about 90 patrons. Jessica Andrews, Executive Director of Arizona Theatre Company, had flown in, as had Susie Medak, Managing Director at Berkeley Rep.

At the top of the show I was nervous because the actors were so ramped up for the first Jet/Shark scene. The show had already found a strong running energy, and if it started out too "amped" it could get out of control. But things quickly settled when Maria (played by Carey Brown) and Anita (played by Ivette Sosa), came on.

After a week and a half of battling with the balance of sound in the space, we had finally reached a quality of production that I was pleased with. (Though, I admit that my toes still clinched when the trombone dragged his cue in the middle of the prologue.)

I sat next to John Armour, our fight director, and his five-year-old son, Jack. Jack helped. He somehow allowed me to just take a breath, kick back and smile. I mean, what other option does the director have at that point? You might as well let go because there is no longer anything you can do.

And the performance, I had to admit, was pretty damn good. I even found myself touched at the end when the Jets first begin to pick up Tony's slain body. A lot of wet eyes in the house and a vigorous standing ovation.

Opening Week *continued*

Afterward, I felt like I was swimming in a sea of excitement and warm feedback. I was touched by comments from colleagues in the arts community, who seemed to see the Armory's success as a signal of larger things to come for all of us.

At the party afterward, people just hung out, chatted and danced. Rose Riordan (PCS associate artistic director), stopped by my office and we stood on the balcony and watched for several minutes. Just drinking it in. Gratified that people seemed to want to hang out in the space. Five little girls made up their own dance on the mezzanine level, and the revelry didn't seem ready to diminish when I dragged my tired self out of the building around midnight.

It was a thrilling ending (or beginning) to the Armory story. We had hoped and prayed and dreamed that the transformation of the building would create a warmer, more interactive, more human relationship with our community. In its first week of life, it was looking like that dream was going to come true.

In an interview that afternoon, the theater critic from *The Seattle Times* had described the space as feeling, "Portland Earthy Chic." In my curtain speech on opening night, I said that all day the thought in my head had been, "This is what Portland can do." The truly unique amalgam of energies and aspirations of the Armory would likely not have come together in quite the same way in any other city in the world. That I have had the enormous privilege to see this dream realized in a city I love so much is a great testament to the many, many people here who care about theater, about sustainability, about our history, and most clearly about making our community a more interesting place to live.





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Chris Coleman