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LOS ANGELES

BEVERLY HILLS' NEW
LANDMARK IS A LOVE LETTER
TO THE PERFORMING ARTS.
BY LIBBY SLATE

SETTING

THE STAGE

For months, passersby saw the fanciful murals adorning the barrier walls of the construction site at Santa Monica Boulevard and Cañon Drive in Beverly Hills: "Today construction, tomorrow concertos," read one. "Today bulldozers, tomorrow ballet," announced another. ¶ The signs portended the creation of the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, which transforms a former U.S. post office, enhancing the site of that historic 1933 Italianate-style structure with the addition of a brand-new building.

The murals are down, and the building is up: The Annenberg Center opened its doors with a gala celebration chaired by Jamie Tisch and co-chaired by Robert Redford and Brad Pitt; its inaugural public performances were courtesy of the Martha Graham Dance Company.

With two theaters—the 500-seat Goldsmith Theater and the 150-seat Lovelace Studio Theater—a children's theater school and a diverse array of programming, the center is a welcome addition not just to Beverly Hills. "We're a performing arts center for all of Los Angeles," says executive director Lou Moore, formerly the founding managing director of the Geffen Playhouse. "Beverly Hills is very important and near and dear to us, but the programming is open to all."

Some of the first-season programming pays homage to the post office, Moore says: Martha Graham's *Chronicle* was created in Los Angeles during the time the structure was being built, and the Miklós László play *Parfumerie* is about sparring employees who unknowingly are writing love letters to each other.

Other offerings include the Kneehigh Theatre's production of Noël Coward's *Brief Encounter* (Feb. 15-March 23); *Baseball Swing*, a show with music, video and images produced in conjunction with the National Baseball Hall of Fame (April 4-6); the West Coast premiere of the Ricky Ian Gordon-Leonard Foglia chamber opera *A Coffin in Egypt*, starring Frederica von Stade (April 23-27); and family programming including E.B. White's *The Trumpet of the Swan*, with music by Jason Robert Brown (May 2-4).

The performing arts center has been a long time coming. Moore left the Geffen in 2000 to become involved, and in 2004, the Annenberg Foundation made a \$15 million grant to establish

what was then known as the Wallis Annenberg Cultural Center.

At the time, philanthropist Annenberg said of her father, late publisher and diplomat Walter Annenberg, that his "greatest legacy to me is a love for the arts and an appreciation for their impact and value in each of our lives." After various delays, the project broke ground in March 2010, and construction on the new theater space began in April 2011.

Presiding over it all is chief architect Zoltan E. Pali, a Los Angeles native who, with Renzo Piano, is also designing the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures; his previous projects include the renovations of the Pantages and Greek theaters.

Before he came onboard, Pali recalls, the vision was to use the post office as the main stage. "My feeling was, you have to absolutely do the exact opposite—use the post office for small items, and build a state-of-the-art theater," he says. "Connect the two underground, but do not touch the historic post office. You'd have to rip the building apart and compromise the architecture."

Accordingly, with the assistance of design consultant Peyton Hall and his Historic Resources Group, the post office was renovated and restored. Some 24,000 terra cotta roof tiles had to be removed and reinstalled because of the waterproofing of the roof, and the area where customers once bought stamps now serves as the box office.

The building is also home to the Studio Theater,

a gift shop and cafe, and children's classrooms for the school planned for summer. The Studio Theater is used for smaller productions, cabaret, workshops, rehearsals, special events and rentals.

Though the Goldsmith Theater looks up-to-the-minute new, with its exterior walls of Swisspearl cement composite and its expansive window wall, that building, too, pays homage to the post office. The coppery color of the intriguingly shaped

design panels that clad the walls corresponds to the terra cotta accents on the post office.

And the building's panels represent Pali's "interpretation and abstraction of the cultural history" of the site, referencing the delivery and sorting of mail.

"I thought of the handwritten mail, the handwritten envelopes—I really got into the tactility of all that," he explains. "What if all the envelopes came back and clad the building? We started with a 4-by-9 envelope and turned it, sliced and diced it, and cut it into a subtle, beautiful pattern. We call it 'the return of the envelopes.'"

The Annenberg complex also includes a sculpture garden, courtyard, promenade and subterranean parking garage. Inside the post office building, above the three windows of what is now the grand entrance, are three words that will be illuminated at night: "Enlightenment," "Cooperation" and "Communication."

"They were engraved in 1934," Moore says, "and they still resonate today. They resonate perfectly for a performing arts center."

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OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF WALLIS ANNEBERG CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS