

Alfred University to break ground on Miller Theater

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Alfred University will break ground Friday on a new proscenium theater to complement the facilities at the Miller Performing Arts Center. The ceremony is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. at the site, just north of the current building. Dr. Marlin Miller Jr., a 1954 alumnus of Alfred University, as well as a chairman emeritus and current member of the Board of Trustees, and his wife Ginger are donating the funds to build the new theater to be connected to the Miller Performing Arts Center, which they also gave to the University and which opened in 1995. "We are looking forward to completion of what will be a showcase theater," said President Charles M. Edmondson. "A theater of this size and quality will allow us to expand both our academic offerings in Performing Arts and to enhance our programming for the community. With what we already have in place in the Miller Performing Arts Center (See <http://www.alfred.edu/map...>), and what we will add with this new building, we will have an exceptional facility, one that will rival those typically found at much larger universities." The theater will be housed in a 31,000-square-foot building that will be connected - visually and physically - to the existing Miller Performing Arts Center. Architect Bruce Wood of Kallmann McKinnell & Wood Architects, Boston, designed the original structure with the addition of a theater in mind. The new building will be located to the north of the existing structure. With the construction of the new theater, Miller's vision of a complete performing arts center for Alfred University, first discussed in 1991, will be complete. "In 1991, we were asked by Marlin Miller to come to Alfred to look at the possibility of building a performing arts center," Wood recalled. "We toured the entire campus and undertook a study of a number of alternative sites for a building to house theater, music and dance [programs], and also to house a large performance hall." The site chosen was at the north end of State Street, "reflecting the angle of buildings at the far end of State (Seidlin Hall) and facing toward the open fields north of the village," said Wood. From the beginning, the project was "planned to occur in two phases and as such, the public lobby was placed on the north end between the two phases." The original building, which has won architectural awards, is "upside down," with the main spaces on the upper levels and the faculty offices on the lower levels. "The building has two scale: the large scale of the valley side, where the practice rooms overlook the open landscape, and the small scale of the campus side, where individual rooms overlook the street. For over a decade, the building has announced one's arrival at Alfred" and defined the north end of State Street. "Looking at the size of the current building, Wood decided to create a separate structure connected to the existing structure at the ground level, where the experimental "black box" theater, the C.D. Smith Theatre, is located. A choral studio will occupy the link between the two structures. "The new structure is designed to relate to phase one, but to also project a more public image," Wood said. There will be a glazed public lobby on State Street, with the same brick as is on the first phase used on the exterior. Inside is "effectively a single performance space, with support areas for performers and the public. The performance space is designed to accommodate music, dance and theater productions, with a key element being an orchestra pit that can easily be converted into an extension of the stage, bringing musicians and dancers closer to the audience, Wood noted. The stage itself will be very large, about 3,000 square feet, said Michael Neiderbach, executive director of capital projects. Moveable orchestra shells will allow the stage opening to be expanded if the production requires it. Lighting equipment will be state-of-the-art. Acoustics are an important consideration in any performance space; the theater in Miller will feature unusual wood panels, some concave and some convex, depending upon location, to either reflect or refract sound waves. Neiderbach noted the theater will seat 479, with about one-eighth of the seats removable to allow for greater flexibility in configuration. In the lobby, stone flooring will match what is found in the north lobby in the original building. Also tying the two buildings together visually will be an installation by Wayne Higby (see <http://art.alfred.edu/fac...>), Alfred University professor of ceramic art, whose "EarthCloud" (See <http://www.alfred.edu/nys...>) tile installation dominates one wall of the existing lobby. Construction is expected to be completed by the end of 2009, and available for productions by the fall of 2010, Neiderbach said.