

ECLECTIC MIX WILL FILL THE NEW PERFORMING ARTS CENTER'S TWO THEATERS

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Willie Nelson, world famous soprano Kathleen Battle and Grammy Award-winning Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano are just a few of the eclectic performers who will be among the first to take the stage at Long Center for the Performing Arts when the \$77 million venue opens in March.

Long Center officials say they wanted to emphasize that the two-theater center, built to replace the city-owned Palmer Auditorium, will be an entertainment destination designed to appeal to everyone, not just the audiences of the center's founding resident companies: Austin Lyric Opera, Austin Symphony Orchestra and Ballet Austin.

The 2,300-seat Michael and Susan Dell Hall is one of two indoor venues at the \$77 million Long Center for the Performing Arts, which will open in March on the site of the former Palmer Auditorium in what is now Town Lake Park. The lineup of shows being made public today will span an array of entertainment programming from classical to modern.

"Our core value is 'community first.' Our keynote is diversity," said Cliff Redd, Long Center executive director. "We don't want to drive ourselves into a niche. Our niche is everyone."

A free public open house March 6-9 will introduce the community to the center with family-friendly programming and behind-the-scenes tours of the Long Center's theaters: the 2,300-seat Michael and Susan Dell Hall and the flexible 240-seat Debra and Kevin Rollins Studio Theatre.

Nelson, along with Texas music luminaries Lyle Lovett, Rick Trevino, Flaco Jimenez and Ray Benson with Asleep at the Wheel, are scheduled to perform March 29 at one of two gala fundraising concerts. Multiple Tony award-winning performer and Texas native Tommy Tune will host the March 28 show by the symphony, opera and ballet.

Redd and other Long Center leaders will make the lineup of shows public today. "Our holistic approach to programming is our innovation," Redd said. National observers agree.

Lisa Booth, a New York arts producer who is chair of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, said that programming spanning the spectrum from pop music to Broadway musicals to modern dance dovetails with the current trend for large civic performing arts centers.

"It's a very smart thing to do," Booth said of the Long Center's programmatic approach. "And it's definitely a model that's worked around the country. People who come for one type of event realize what else (a performing arts center) has to offer and then are more inclined to give something new a try. One sort of event reinforces another and keeps things active and vibrant."

Battle, celebrated for her lyric voice, will perform a solo concert on April 7 at the Dell Hall. Beatles tribute band Rain takes the stage May 3, followed by Mariachi Los Camperos on May 4 and Nashville-based bluegrass band Cherryholmes on May 18. Musicals coming to the Long Center include the family-friendly "The Musical Adventures of Flat Stanley," the Janis Joplin life story "Love, Janis" and the comic "3 Redneck Tenors."

In August, Spanish-language television network Univision will host its annual awards show in Dell Hall.

Tickets to Long Center presented performances will go on sale in February. Tickets for Austin Lyric Opera, Austin Symphony Orchestra and Ballet Austin Long Center shows are currently on sale through each organization.

Redd said he was proud that numerous small- and medium-sized Austin arts groups have booked their performances at the Long Center.

Internationally recognized Austin theater collective the Rude Mechanicals will premiere a new play March 29-April 12. Bilingual theater company Teatro Vivo, Austin Shakespeare Festival, modern folkloric dance company Aztlan Dance and African American arts presenters Pro Arts Collective also have shows planned in the first few months of the Long Center's opening. Classical music groups such as Grammy-nominated chorus Conspirare, the Austin Chamber Music Center and A. Mozart Fest. among others, are on the roster.

The Long Center "will feel like a reflection of our city," Redd said. "We're an eclectic town. Austin likes a variety of things to do."

Plans to transform the 1950s-era Palmer Auditorium into a new civic performing arts center have been in the works in one form or another since the early 1990s.

Austin's symphony, opera and ballet used the University of Texas' Bass Concert Hall since the early 1980s for most performances. But scheduling conflicts, venue constraints and the increased demand for more shows led arts leaders to begin the quest to build a civic performing arts venue that would serve as a permanent home for Austin's major performing arts groups as well as provide a central downtown destination for smaller local arts presenters.

Voters endorsed the concept for a new performing arts center in 1998, and in 1999, arts backers signed a deal with the city to lease the land where the Palmer Auditorium stood at South First Street and West Riverside Drive. A new Palmer Events Center was built next door on Barton Springs Road.

The Long Center is named for Austin philanthropists Joe and Teresa Lozano Long who donated \$20 million to kick-start the project in 1999.

After the project grew during the high-tech boom, Long Center officials scaled it back in 2003 from a \$125.1 million four-venue complex to a \$77 million two-theater space. Once built, the new venue will belong to the city, while a private nonprofit will operate the building.

The current design, by Austin architect Stan Haas of Nelsen Partners, uses about 45 percent of the existing 1950s-era domed auditorium, while recycling much of the original material.

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