



## Expect the unexpected

EMPAC promises equal measures of experimentation and performance

BY GREG HAYMES  
STAFF WRITER

"Open up your mind. Open up your senses," says Johannes Goebel. "You've got to be open to new things."

As director of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center, Goebel promises plenty of "new things" are headed our way when the ribbon is cut and the doors are opened to the brand-spanning new \$200 million facility on Friday.

Working with curators in three specific performance fields — Micah Silver (music), Helene Lesterlin (dance) and Kathleen Forde (time-based arts) — Goebel has packed EMPAC with an almost nonstop, wall-to-wall series of events over the next three weekends to introduce the Capital Region to the sparkling new 220,000-square-foot facility. The massive building houses

four world-class, state-of-the-art, high-tech performance spaces — a 1,200-seat concert hall, an intimate 400-seat theater and two highly flexible black-box performance venues.

Designed by the London firm of Nicholas Grimshaw & Partners, the building is indeed dazzling, and it's certainly worth a trip just to marvel at the architecture. Built on a 45-degree hill near the intersection of Eighth Street and College Avenue in the southwest corner of the RPI campus, the sleek right angles of the glass-walled structure encase the swooping, curved lines of the orb-shaped, red cedar concert hall like some kind of steampunk spaceship in a bottle.

"It's totally unique," declares Goebel with justifiable pride. "There's not another building with this quality, this combination of venues and this technical infrastructure under one roof

Please see **EXPECT H2** ▶



INSIDE THE concert hall, fabric is stretched across the ceiling. It can be used to "tune" the hall, adjusting to control and change the quality of sound.



EMPAC VI will be gre with the str red cedar the 1,200-concert ha the Renss Polytechn campus in At top, the of the hall prepared f day on Fric

## Music, theater, video and more highlight EMPAC's opening

The opening of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center brings with it three weekends of events — the Gala Weekend beginning Friday, the Symposium Weekend beginning Oct. 9 and the Family Weekend beginning Oct. 17.

What follows are the public

events for the first weekend. For later dates, please visit the EMPAC Web site at <http://www.empac.rpi.edu> or call 276-4135.

### Friday

■ **10 a.m.:** Presidential colloquy "Photons, Sound Waves, and Data Bytes: Creativity at the Nexus of

Science, Technology, Media and the Arts," moderated by RPI President Shirley Ann Jackson. Darrin Communications Center 308.

■ **Noon:** Ribbon cutting. EMPAC east entrance. Building tours follow ceremony.

### Saturday

■ **10 a.m.:** EMPAC Building

Presentation. Concert Hall. Architect and design team discuss acoustics, design process and structure.

■ **Noon:** Per Tengstrand: "2 Hands, 3 Pianos." Concert Hall. Works chosen for EMPAC's grand pianos: a Bosendorfer, a Fazioli and a Hamburg Steinway.

Please see **OPENING H3** ▶

◀ **PAULINE OLIVEROS** will lead a "Deep Listening" workshop on Oct. 5 in the EMPAC concert hall.

▶ **THE PIANIST** Per Tengstrand will perform on EMPAC's three grand pianos: a Bosendorfer, a Fazioli and a Hamburg Steinway.

ALEXANDER KENNEY



# EXPECT: RPI pushes boundaries of performance art and science

▼ CONTINUED FROM H1

anywhere else on the planet. If you think about the Media Lab at MIT, which is famous for the integration of media and technology, no, they don't have facilities like this. Not even close."

Of course, EMPAC is much more than just a performing arts center. In addition to the four major performance spaces, the building also houses four work studios for artists in residence, a rehearsal hall, a café, professional audio and video production studios, and a research suite.

But the general public will primarily interface with the building as a performance venue. So what kinds of performances are in store?

"We're focusing on high-level, high-quality events which are challenging," says Goebel. "We are not creating a program that competes with any existing entity in the Capital Region. We're not competing with Proctors. We're not competing with the Spectrum Theatres."

While traditional performance arts are generally meant to be seen or heard (or both), EMPAC is going one step-beyond. Performances at EMPAC are meant to be experienced. Goebel frequently describes the works as "interactive" and "immersive environments."

The key to what EMPAC is all about is the integration of art and technology, and Goebel is fond of such phrases as "the human-digital interface" and "the bridge between the left and right brain."

So don't expect to see popular entertainment like "Mamma Mia" or a Josh Groban concert at EMPAC, where the focus is squarely on pushing the envelope and thinking outside the box.

Or as Goebel told the Times Union when he was appointed as director back in 2002, "You don't get answers at EMPAC. You get questions."

Thought provoking questions like "What does this mean?" "What would happen if we did

this?" and, of course, "What is art?"

But another one of those questions is whether the Capital Region will support such an adventurous arts venture. Is there a big enough audience for the experimental arts to keep filling the 1,200-seat concert hall?

Just last week, for example, the 982-seat Hart Theatre at The Egg in Albany hosted the new Laurie Anderson show, "Homeland." Despite the fact that Laurie Anderson is perhaps the most mainstream, well-known avant-garde performance artist in America, the theater was less than half full.

"We're not a traditional performing arts center," explains music curator Silver. "EMPAC is more like a research and production facility than it is a for-profit

## Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center

■ **Address:** 110 Eighth St., Troy

■ **General info:** 276-4135

■ **Box office:** 276-3921

■ **Web site:** <http://www.empac.rpi.edu>

or even a nonprofit American-style performing arts center, where it's very important to fill the house on a nightly basis. We don't have an endless series of events happening here. Rather, the intention is to have artists actually come in and use that space to produce a new work.

"So my concern is less with whether 1,200 people will show up and more with starting to use that space in unique ways. Over time, I think people will come around to what's happening there.

"It's my imperative to bring the most interesting things to that space and also to try to find artists who are interested in using a traditional concert hall in unconventional ways. I think of it much more as a site for experimentation than about getting butts in the seats."

Although the new building won't open until Friday, the EMPAC organization has presented more than 50 performances since April 2004 at various locations around RPI's campus and the Capital Region, including WMHT-TV studios, the Schenectady Museum and the Rensselaer County Historical Society.

With Friday's opening, however, EMPAC has shifted into high gear, offering more than 50 events over the course of the next three weekends. And it's a diverse, broad range of performances from hip-hop Renaissance man Madlib to the Albany Symphony Orchestra, from Norwegian performance-theater ensemble Verdensteatret to the Japanese artists collective dumb type, from the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis to Christine Southworth's Ensemble Robot. All of them are open to the public for free, but many tickets have already been reserved.

Here are a few highlights:

■ **The Inaugural Concert** featuring the Albany Symphony Orchestra, pianist Per Tengstrand, the Vox Vocal Ensemble and the International Contemporary Ensemble (7:30 p.m. Saturday) — A fluid, 70-minute concert, in which the musicians won't just be on the stage, but performing from various locations throughout the new concert hall — including from above the theater's tuned fabric ceiling.

■ **The Wooster Group's "There Is Still Time ... Brother"** (daily Saturday-Oct. 19) — A 20-minute interactive film installation with the audience encircled by a 40-foot-round, 15-foot-high 360-degree movie screen.

■ **Cecil Taylor and Pauline Oliveros: Duet** (8 p.m. Sunday) — A concert in three parts, featuring a solo piano set from Taylor, a solo accordion set from Oliveros and an improvisational duet with both of them. Taylor will also offer "Floating Gardens," a performance of his poetry, at 2



PHOTOS BY PAUL BUCKOWSKI/TIMES UNION

**THE NEW** Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center is more than just a concert hall. The 220,000-square-foot building contains four performance venues and various rehearsal and studio spaces, all within shimmering glass.

p.m. Sunday.

Beyond the three-week grand opening parade of events, the inaugural season of performances at EMPAC will feature approximately 40 events, ranging from a series of lectures on the topic of time to full-blown multimedia productions.

For example, one of the most intriguing events on the fall calendar is the Elevator Repair Service, the acclaimed New York City theater ensemble under the direction of John Collins. On Nov. 21 and 22, the company will perform "Gatz,"

their controversial, marathon presentation of the entire text of F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel, "The Great Gatsby." The performance runs for six and a half hours.

On Nov. 13, New York City artist Toni Dove presents "Spec-trotopia," a time-traveling science fiction tale told through a hybrid of film, theater and interactive art on multiple oversized screens.

And upcoming on Jan. 16 is "God Builds Like Frank Lloyd Wright," a collection of short animated films with live narration by filmmaker Brent Green and live

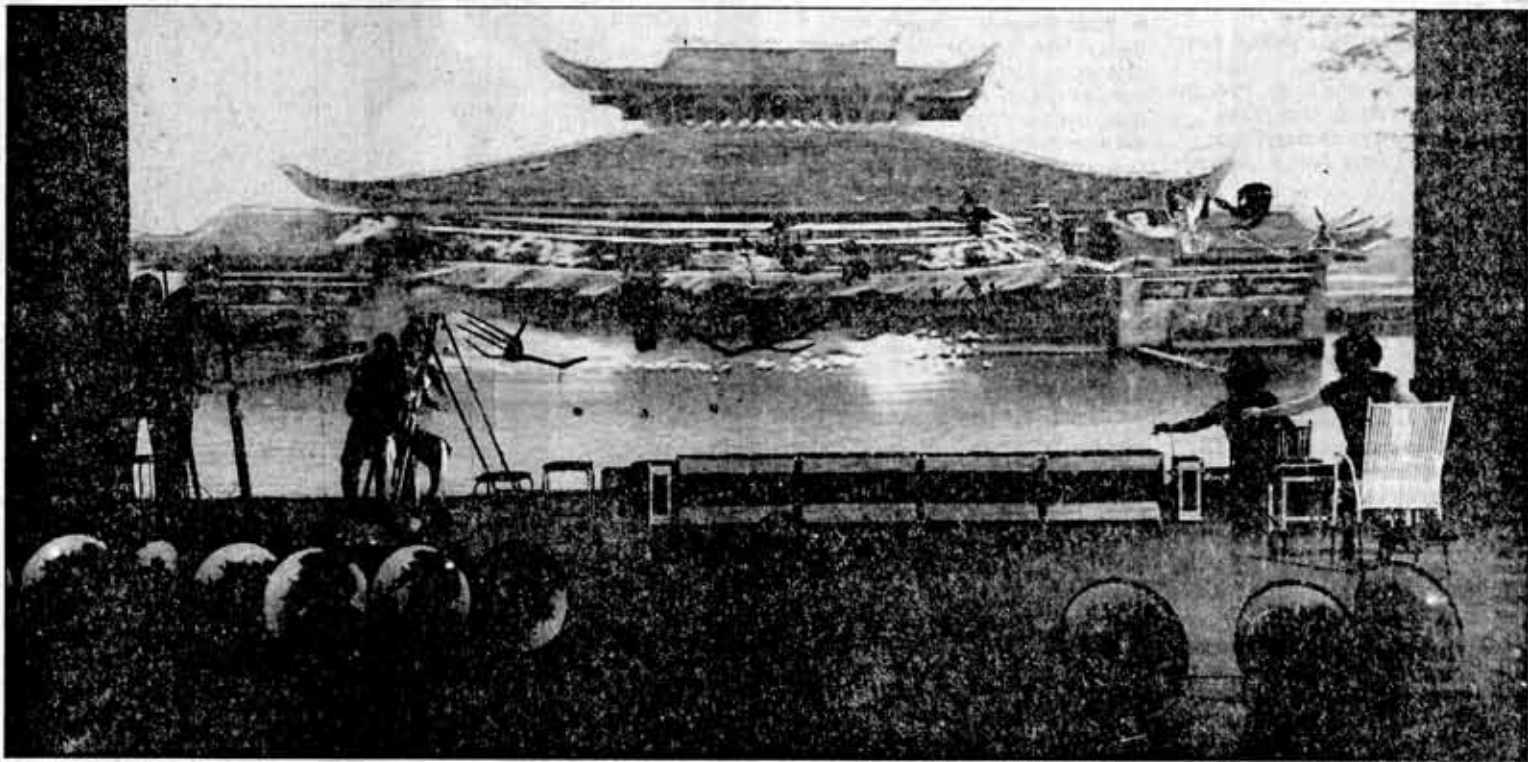
music by guest musicians, including drummer Brendan Canty of the pioneering hardcore band Fugazi.

That's just a sampling of what's in store. So reserve a ticket. Throw away your preconceived notions about the performing arts. Take a chance.

"That's what EMPAC is really all about," Goebel says. "Giving people the opportunity to change their opinions."

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# OPENING: Diverse events on tap at EMPAC



VERDENSTEATRET

**THE NOREWEGIAN** group Verdensteatret's "Louder," which will be performed on Oct. 4 and 5 at EMPAC, combines robotics, video, sound, music, shadow play, object theatre and new technology. The piece was inspired by travels to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam.

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■ **12:30 p.m.:** Workspace Unlimited: "Hybrid Space and the Panoramic Screen." Studio 1 — Goodman. An immersive 360-degree panoramic screen will show art projects created with video game engines. Show repeats.

■ **2 p.m.:** dumb type: "Voyage." Theater. Multimedia performance examines the uncertainty and dislocation of the modern world. Show repeats.

■ **2 p.m.:** Verdensteatret: "Louder." Studio 2. Norwegian artists combine robotics, video, sound, music, shadow play, object theatre and new technology, inspired by travels in the Mekong Delta. Show repeats.

■ **3:30 p.m.:** Dance Movies commission premiere. Concert Hall. Screening of the first four dance films commissioned through the Dance Movies Commission, an EMPAC program.

■ **5 p.m.:** Verdensteatret: "Louder." Studio 2.

■ **7:30 p.m.** Inaugural concert. Concert Hall. A guide across 400 years of music composition with nearly 150 performers.

■ **8 p.m.:** Verdensteatret: "Louder." Studio 2.

■ **10 p.m.:** dumb type: "Voyage."

■ **11 p.m.:** Open Late with Madlib. Studio 1 — Goodman. Madlib, J. Rocc, Juiceboxxx provides beats, with live video projections by Imnopf.

## Sunday, Oct. 5

■ **9 a.m.:** Talks & Brunch. Evelyn's Cafe. Catch behind-the-scenes glimpses of artworks and performances presented by EMPAC.

■ **10:30 a.m.:** Johannes Goebel. Studio Beta. Director of EMPAC gives an informal talk about the



center.

■ **11 a.m.:** Pauline Oliveros Deep Listening Workshop. Concert Hall. Pauline Oliveros introduces "Deep Listening," a practice of expanding one's attention to sound and the listening body beyond everyday experience.

■ **11:30 a.m.:** Elizabeth LeCompte Talk. Studio 1 — Goodman. Director of the Wooster Group gives an informal talk.

■ **1 p.m.:** Behind the Scenes: Dance Movies Commission. Panel discussion by the artists who created the first four dance film projects of the Dance Movies Commission program.

■ **2 p.m.:** Cecil Taylor: "Floating Gardens." Theater. Poetry reading.

■ **3 p.m.:** Verdensteatret: "Louder" with Q&A. Studio 2.

■ **4 p.m.:** Pioneers of Experimental Media. Theater. RPI's Department of the Arts compiled a DVD

of the most outstanding works from faculty, alumni, and the department's events series, iEAR presents!

■ **5 p.m.:** Workspace Unlimited: "Hybrid Space and the Panoramic Screen." Studio 1 — Goodman.

■ **5:30 p.m.:** In sight/Out look. Theater. RPI scientists Selmer Bringsjord, Barbara Cutler, Shekhar Garde, Kenneth Jansen present their latest research combining light, images and media.

■ **6 p.m.:** Verdensteatret: "Louder." Studio 2.

■ **8 p.m.:** Pauline Oliveros and Cecil Taylor: Duet. Concert Hall. Two of the most renowned composer/improvisors will present a concert in three parts: Taylor solo, Oliveros solo and a duo improvisation.

## Ongoing presentations

The following will be open to the public from Saturday through

Oct. 19.

■ **EMPAC Architecture and Design Exhibit:** Studio Beta. Exhibit tracks the construction of EMPAC.

■ **Workspace Unlimited "Hybrid Space and the Panoramic Screen":** Studio 1 — Goodman. Art projects created with modified video game engines.

■ **Billy Cowie, "In The Flesh":** Studio Beta Vestibule. A 3-D video installation of a dancer who seems to be in the space, solid and real, and gazing back.

■ **"Offsite EMPAC Events 2004-2008":** Level 7 hallway. Exhibit traces the timeline of EMPAC events, starting with Wow & Flutter in 2004 thru Between a Rock and a Tiny Bell this last spring.

■ **The Wooster Group "There Is Still Time ... Brother":** Studio 1 — Goodman. An interactive war film where the audience stands inside a 360-degree projection screen.

— Staff reports