

ARTS FEATURE

At Rensselaer, the Future Is Now

When EMPAC opens in October 2008, it will integrate technology with the artistic experience in ways its builders can still only imagine

By Shawn Stone

It's an unexpectedly warm and humid September night in Troy, and scores of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute students are swarming around campus. It's a Friday, and most are clearly dressed for the usual collegiate hijinks. Some, however, are making their way to tonight's performance by the Australian dance group BalletLab, which is being presented by the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at the RPI Playhouse. An even mix of students and community (or faculty) members, tonight's crowd reaches up the steps from 15th Street and into the Playhouse lobby.

Interestingly, the ushers don't open the theater doors at showtime. Instead, people are led outside though a side door, and back inside through another side door, into the stage area of the theater.

The reason is immediately apparent: The risers for the audience are set up over the stage, and BalletLab have "retrofitted" the part of the auditorium where the chairs would usually be set up with a large white floor. This floor is connected to a large white back wall.

The sight is at first disorienting, as the temporary "stage" area takes up as much—or more—space than the risers for the audience. The performance, of BalletLab's acclaimed one-hour-long work *Amplification*, is powerful stuff. It combines virtuoso dance, dramatic lighting, and an improvising DJ to create an atmosphere of tension and fear; suggestions of violence are shocking and thought-provoking. It's a challenging work, but EMPAC didn't have any problem getting people to come out: Every seat is filled.

EMPAC, you see, is currently an arts (and, since this is RPI, sciences) organization. One year from now, it will be an arts (and sciences) organization *and* a performing arts center that will be—if all goes as has been so meticulously planned—state of the art in just about every way you can imagine.

Right now, explains Kathleen Forde, EMPAC's curator of time-based arts, they are dealing with the "challenge of putting on events in satellite spaces" like the RPI Playhouse—and West Hall Auditorium, the Chapel + Cultural Center and the numerous places on the Rensselaer campus where they've been staging events over the last two years.

It's about, she says, "building the EMPAC brand." Letting the people on campus and in the surrounding region know the kind of cutting-edge theater, dance, music and art experiences that are associated with EMPAC's mission. Already, EMPAC has formed working relationships with such notable organizations as the Wooster Group and the Light Surgeons.

Micah Silver, assistant curator of music, explains that EMPAC "will, for the first time in the U.S. since the late 1960s and '70s, provide facilities for more complicated sound installations."

Hélène Lesterlin, curator of dance, credits RPI president Shirley Ann Jackson (who conceived the idea for EMPAC) and director Johannes Goebel for having the vision to hire curators two and a half years before the new building opens. Asked about the difficulties of staging something like the BalletLab in the Playhouse, Lesterlin smiles and says she looks forward to next year's opening: "Our spaces in EMPAC [will be] so flexible."

The EMPAC building-in-progress, which towers over Troy from its 8th Street perch, is still a busy construction site. It is, however, far enough along that one can get a clear idea of what it is in the process of becoming.

A few days after the BalletLab performance, director Johannes Goebel leads a small tour through the structure that, when finished, will house a 1,200-seat concert hall "designed and constructed to the highest acoustical and performance standards," a 400-seat theater, a 3,500 square-foot studio with a 40-foot-high ceiling, a 2,500 square-foot studio "optimized for music," a rehearsal studio, artist-in-residence studios, a café, a V.I.P. room, professional recording facilities and more.

"There is," Goebel explains, "no other building like this in the U.S. . . . in the world."

Standing in what will be the lobby of the building, the air filled with the sound of construction workers and the dank smell of cement dust, Goebel points out the first of the many revolutionary features of the building. The glass wall, which stretches along the building's entire north side, will have metal framing through which glycol will flow in order to eliminate unsightly condensation on the glass.

From the lobby, we enter what will be the back of the concert hall. Goebel, who has been involved in every step of the planning, speaks knowledgeably—and fondly—of the cutting-edge features designed to create an unparalleled acoustical experience.

The precast, textured stone walls. The massive springs, tuned to 6 hertz, which underpin the hall, and are designed to render any sound bleed-through inaudible. The fabric ceiling—"it's new, the first in the world"—which will billow over the audience. The flexible features that will allow screens, or whatever, to be hung at the sides of the hall or over the audience. The innovative air-conditioning system, which involves cool air flowing up through holes drilled in every seat in the hall, designed to make no noise.

The prime objective, Goebel says, is to "create the optimal sound environment. There is," he adds, "no compromise of functionality."

The rest of the unfinished building is much the same. All of the labs/performance spaces will be hardwired into computer networks. Each of the spaces will be acoustically insulated from the others, so that four performances could be going on simultaneously (and harmoniously).

Studio two, the smaller of the studios, is the next stop. As we enter into the space, you can hear the difference: Even in its unfinished state, all the construction sounds from the rest of the building fade away. This black-box theater will have 100-pound "pods" hanging from the ceiling for digital projection. RPI molecular biologists will be able to project biological structural models; the Internet could be projected as a virtual environment that you could walk, or—hanging from wires rigged for this purpose—fly through. The adjoining studio one is larger, allowing for projections up to 30 feet high.

This, Goebel explains, will provide the ability to test things in "real space, physical space."

Standing there, in the middle of this soon-to-be technological marvel, with its multipurpose computer systems and capabilities, one can't help but start thinking fantastic thoughts. "This building is like the ship in Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*, which can flip from being a luxury liner to a battleship in minutes. It's like . . . it's like . . . It's like a transformer."

After visiting the equally impressive theater space, where the first thing you notice is that the stage area is almost the same size as the audience area, the tour makes its way back up to the lobby level for a final stop: the Founders' Room, which will be the V.I.P. area on event nights.

The view is spectacular, and one can't help but think—is this really in downtown Troy?



It's not a space pod, it's a lobby: EMPAC.

PHOTO: Leif Zurmühlen



A couple of curators: (l-r) Kathleen Forde and Micah Silver.

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