

Cygnnet Theatre unveils 'The Joan'

The company's 21st season kicks off with Sondheim's 'Follies,' launching the \$43.5M performing arts complex

By Pam Kragen
UNION-TRIBUNE

The opening of the Joan and Irwin Jacobs Performing Arts Center at Liberty Station is still eight months away, but today Cygnnet Theatre unveiled the lineup for the first season of musicals and plays it plans to produce in the \$43.5-million complex.

Nicknamed "The Joan" in memory of local philanthropist Joan Jacobs, who died last May, the 32,000-square-foot project is being built inside the historic Naval Building 178, a 1942-era recreation building that had been boarded up since 1997.

Cygnnet Theatre partnered with the NTC Foundation, which built the thriving arts district at Liberty Station, to bring the state-of-the-art performing arts center to the community, which was built at the former Naval Training Center San Diego.

The Joan will become the permanent home of Cygnnet, which was co-founded 22 years ago by Executive Director Bill Schmidt and Artistic Director Sean Murray. Cygnnet now occupies the Theatre in Old Town. The Joan also will provide performance space to some of Liberty Station's resident dance companies.

Earlier this month, Schmidt, Murray and NTC Foundation President and CEO Lisa Johnson led a walk-through tour of the three-story building, which will include the 280-plus-seat Joseph Claves II proscenium theater; the 150-seat black-box Dorothea Laub Theater (nicknamed "the Dottie"); offices, rehearsal, dressing and green rooms; concessions, bathrooms, a box office and patio.

Johnson said great care has gone into creating a building that restores the building's historic arched colonnades, clay roof tiles and original footprint while creating a sonically perfect arts space with sound-proof ceiling materials that block the noise of jets taking off from nearby San Diego International Airport, as well as a whisper-quiet heating and air-conditioning system.

Murray recently spoke about how he chose the seven plays and musical that will make up Cygnnet's 21st season kicking off Sept. 10.

The company's 20th season is still underway in Old Town, with three shows planned through July: Jon Robin Baitz's "Other Desert Cities," Feb. 5 through March 2; Katori Hall's "The Hot Wing King," April 9 to May 2; and Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma!" June 11 through July 20.

Murray said much thought went into deciding on the Joan's inaugural season because it is likely to attract many first-time ticket buyers who could become future season ticketholders if they like what they see.

"As an artist trying to set an agenda for the season, I wanted to include a wide range of experiences for those people who subscribe and decided to stick with us for a whole year," he said. "It's like a seven-course menu. Not every show can be a dessert and not every show can be the main entree, so we're trying to find a good balance."

Murray said Cygnnet specializes in presenting an eclectic mix of "ride home plays," meaning shows that are so interesting, thought-provoking and entertaining that audience members want to talk about it afterward on the drive home. "That's why you do theater — so people can engage in conversation and explore communities they're not familiar with and learn about their neighbors and their lives."

In addition to Cygnnet's subscription season, Murray said the company



From left, Cygnnet Theatre Executive Director Bill Schmidt, NTC Foundation President and CEO Lisa Johnson and Cygnnet Artistic Director Sean Murray in the Joseph Claves III Theater inside the Joan and Irwin Jacobs Performing Arts Center, set to open in September. ALEJANDRO TAMAYO / U-T

is also looking into setting aside the month of April 2026 as a dance month, when Malashock Dance, San Diego Ballet and other Liberty Station dance companies can perform at the Joan.

Here's the seven-show 21st season, with Murray's thoughts on each production.

'FOLLIES' Sept. 10-Oct. 5, Joseph Claves III Theater

Murray will open the season by directing this beloved 1971 Stephen Sondheim musical about a farewell reunion at a crumbling, soon-to-close Broadway theater. As retired showgirls arrive to reminisce, the ghosts of their younger selves are present as they recall past joys and regrets. "Follies" is most famous for the songs "Losing My Mind," "I'm Still Here," "Broadway Baby" and "In Buddy's Eyes." It will be staged in the Joan's larger Joseph Claves III Theater.

Murray said he has produced most of Sondheim's best musicals but he lacked a stage big enough for "Follies" until now. Because the musical offers meaty roles for older actors, Murray has cast some of San Diego's most-beloved veteran performers. "We're thinking it's a great way to feature a lot of our local treasures."

"It's a show I've absolutely dreamed of doing forever," Murray said. "It's about nostalgia and confronting yourself midlife about the choices you've made, and all of that is mixed in between this fabulous surreal reunion in a theater full of vaudeville ghosts."

'VANYA AND SONYA AND MASHA AND SPIKE' BY CHRISTOPHER DURANG Oct. 8-Nov. 2 Dottie Studio Theater

San Diego stage director Anthony Methvin will direct this absurdist 2012 contemporary comedy inspired by the characters from Anton Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya." It's about the unhappy reunion of three middle-aged siblings in a highly dysfunctional family. It will be staged in the Joan's smaller black-box space with the audience on three sides of the stage.

"It's a very fun, small-cast show that has some huge laughs. It deals with a lot of life questions and it's a show we all love," Murray said. "It's such a great show for tour de force acting. I've seen a number of things Anthony has directed that I really liked. It is a great play for him. It matches his sense of humor and Anthony is one of those guys you want to showcase



The exterior of the now-in-progress Joan and Irwin Jacobs Performing Arts Center at Liberty Station on Jan. 7. Nicknamed "The Joan," it will open in September as the permanent home of San Diego's Cygnnet Theatre. ALEJANDRO TAMAYO / U-T

and help him keep expanding his career."

'A CHRISTMAS CAROL' ADAPTATION AND LYRICS BY SEAN MURRAY WITH ORIGINAL SCORE BY BILLY THOMPSON Nov. 26-Dec. 24 Joseph Claves III Theater

Murray's recently refreshed his stage adaptation of the Charles Dickens classic will mark its 10th anniversary at the Joan next fall. Murray, who directs the play, said he plans to slightly redesign the show and add two more cast members to better suit the larger stage and frame of the Claves proscenium stage.

"It has to be adjusted to fit in a bigger space without losing the intimacy of its storytelling. We'll be letting the show stretch out and breathe in this new space," he said.

CYGNNET'S A MAGICAL HOLIDAY CHRISTMAS AT THE JOAN Dec. 10-28 Dottie Studio Theater

Carlos Mendoza, Cygnnet's education and outreach director, wrote and directs this holiday song-and-dance revue presented in the style of a 1970s-style TV special. Songs will include "All I Want for Christmas Is You," "Let It Snow," "Feliz Navidad" and "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree." Presented in the black-box Dottie space, the revue will offer a more intimate holiday alternative to "A Christmas Carol."



Carlos Mendoza is the director of education and outreach for Cygnnet Theatre. CYGNNET THEATRE

'SOMEWHERE OVER THE BORDER' BY BRIAN QUIJADA Feb. 18-March 15, 2026 Joseph Claves III Theater

Carlos Mendoza directs and choreographs the San Diego premiere of this 2022 rock/hip-hop/cumbia musical about a young Salvadoran woman named Reina who embarks on a journey from El Salvador to San Diego, where she hopes to achieve her American dream. Set in the 1970s and inspired by L. Frank Baum's "The Wizard of Oz," Reina is a Dorothy-like character who meets three new friends who join her journey north.

"It has a lot of beautiful, vivacious music about celebrating life and getting on the road to meet your dreams. I loved that," Murray said. "The fact that San Diego is featured in this is also special. People may not realize how pivotal San

Diego is to the whole crisis."

'THE LEHMAN TRILOGY' BY STEFANO MASSINI March 25-May 3, 2026 Dottie Studio Theater

Murray directs the San Diego premiere of this 2022 Tony winner for Best Play. Three actors play 80 characters, who trace the 150-year history of the birth, rise and fall of the notorious Lehman Brothers investment firm, whose collapse in 2008 was one of America's greatest financial catastrophes.

The story unspools over three acts with two intermissions. Though the Broadway production was presented on a huge, revolving set, this intimate black-box staging will focus on the language and storytelling in the script.

"It's all about the actors and the words," Murray said. "We really fought to

get the rights ... it's a fascinating story and it's so rich and riveting. The time just flies by."

'THE SPONGEBOB MUSICAL' BY KYLE JARROW June 10-July 19, 2026 Joseph Claves III Theater

Based on Stephen Hillenburg's "SpongeBob SquarePants" animated TV series, this imaginative all-ages 2016 Broadway musical tells the story of SpongeBob and his undersea companions in Bikini Bottom.

It features a score of original songs written by composers including David Bowie, Cyndi Lauper, John Legend and Sara Bareilles.

Katie Banville will direct and choreograph this musical comedy, which Murray hopes will be the first in an annual tradition of dedicating one show each season for family audiences. Since SpongeBob has been an iconic TV character since the late 1990s, Murray said this musical has appeal for adults and children alike.

"It's a truly wonderful show, hilarious and inspiring and it's got great music," Murray said. "There are stipulations in the contract that you not copy the characters from the cartoon but you capture the essence of SpongeBob." The musical's story calls for a chorus of villainous amoeba and more.

For ticket information, visit cygnettheatre.com.