



# PITTSBURGH PLAYHOUSE

AT POINT PARK UNIVERSITY

by Lou Corsaro  
photos by John Altdorfer





After 28 months of construction, the painstaking deconstruction and reconstruction of three historic facades, and the unprecedented restoration of a 22 stained glass-paneled ceiling from Pittsburgh's historic Stock Exchange Building, the gleaming, new Pittsburgh Playhouse is ready for its close-up.





## Pulling Back the Curtain

This month, the new Pittsburgh Playhouse at Point Park University opened to students, audiences, and the downtown community—with events featuring a dedication and gala party to celebrate the \$60 million state-of-the-art theatre and educational facility. “We are thrilled to finally pull back the curtain on this amazing new entertainment center in Downtown Pittsburgh,” said Point Park University president Paul Hennigan. “For those of us who have been a part of seeing this building come to life, it’s a very special moment.”

A 90,411-square-foot theatre complex, the Pittsburgh Playhouse features a total of 91 rooms including a magnificent lobby space that boasts a three story wide-open space with natural light, a grand staircase and tucked-in spaces for students to lounge and gather; the 550-seat PNC Theatre whose backstage and inner workings are visible from the street, resulting in an intentional glimpse into performing arts classes; and the main floor which includes an enormous paint shop, a 2,738-square-foot soundstage three stories high, a 15-foot-high catwalk and 24-foot-high ceilings to provide professional-level learning opportunities to students in multiple disciplines, including cinematography, audio work, lighting work and aesthetics.



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## A Learning Lab for all Students

The new Pittsburgh Playhouse was designed to be a learning laboratory for all Point Park students, not just those enrolled in the University's prestigious Conservatory for the Performing Arts. Students from across the academic community will have experiential learning opportunities that include aspects of producing, marketing, management, ticketing and programming. In addition, the Playhouse will collaborate with the University's Rowland School of Business and Center for Media Innovation on events, lectures and related programming. "This is a unique component of the new Playhouse and was a key driver in its design and mission. We believe the cross-disciplinary opportunities it will provide students will be unrivaled in our region," said Hennigan.

For Pittsburgh's Downtown economy and community, having another exceptional cultural attraction in the Central Business District will continue to help drive visitors to the area. Allowing for passersby to see the main stage area of the Playhouse from the street will help connect community to students and encourage everyone to feel a part of the creative process. Theatre-goers can enjoy the indoor and outdoor seating at the Pittsburgh Playhouse Café and view up-close the larger-than-life restored facades of the Royal, Goettman and Palace buildings.

"For decades, many of our students, faculty and staff have been separated from the rest of the Academic Village in Oakland," said Hennigan. "Now everyone will be part of the greater academic



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community and have an opportunity to be inspired by the energy, vitality and pace of Downtown Pittsburgh. It's a new beginning and we're thrilled to finally get started."

### A Closer Look at Special Features

The new Pittsburgh Playhouse at Point Park University, given its size, state-of-the-art features and Downtown location, is an interdisciplinary space that will act as the entertainment hub for the entire campus.

"At our Oakland facility, we were limited to being a producing house—everything offered was created at the Playhouse," said Kim Martin, producing director. "At the new Playhouse, we are able to also be a presenting house, meaning we can bring in speakers, comedians, bands and more. It will be especially exciting to see the other schools take advantage of the space by scheduling and presenting their own lineups."

In addition, the greater space and sound barriers will allow multiple stages and support spaces to run productions at the same time, something that could never be done at the Oakland facility. In addition to the theatres, stretches of hallways offer opportunities to display student achievements, the café can house art installations and historical displays, and rehearsal spaces can be home to public readings, exhibits and events.

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Also, a typical theatre is symmetrical, meaning there is an even number of seats on both sides of mirroring aisles and balconies. The main theatre of the Playhouse is asymmetrical—it has more seats on one side and overhanging balcony on the other, along with seats on the floor and more balconies, which offer a greater feeling of intimacy. “It’s a warmer room, with pathways that intertwine,” Martin said. “Audiences are

going to want to try different areas and will feel compelled to walk around. That’s just not done in a symmetrical house theatre.”

The transformational Highmark Theatre is adaptable to any seating configuration, while the glass back wall opens to an outside, mini-amphitheater. This allows for unique event opportunities, such as outdoor seating for concerts, or indoor seating for an outdoor

performance. The Rauh Theatre, the most intimate space, has the capacity to fly scenery—an option most black box theatres do not have. “I have a feeling this will be my favorite space,” Martin said.

The old Pittsburgh Playhouse was a hemp house, one of the few surviving in the country—“for good reason,” Martin says. It’s an antiquated system where, when a piece of scenery or lighting is hung, that weight must be countered with sandbags, to allow the piece to fly. The new Playhouse has an arbor counterweight system. “We still counterweight the different lines with stage weights, but the system itself is far, far easier, quicker and more user-friendly. What used to take hours will take minutes,” she said.

A 2,738-square-foot soundstage rising up three floors with a 15-foot-high catwalk and 24-foot-high ceilings will provide professional-level learning opportunities to Cinema Arts students in multiple disciplines, including cinematography, audio work, lighting work and aesthetics. While it primarily operates as a classroom and for student projects, professional filmmakers will have the opportunity to make use of the space for projects and provide additional learning opportunities to Cinema Arts students.

The breathtaking main lobby looks like an internal street. “The shafts of light—the magnificence of it is something to behold,” Martin said. “Four stories of wide-open space and light is stunning, but my favorite view of the lobby is its counterpart. Standing atop the very modern, grand staircase looking down to the main entrance on Forbes Avenue literally brought tears to my eyes the first time I saw it.”

Tucked-in spaces along the grand staircase allow people to lounge while hanging out in the lobby. The indoor loading dock, located in the scene shop, will bring to an end the days of unloading wood and steel in the snow and rain. The dock also will allow stage sets to be brought in fully completed, as opposed to the old Playhouse, where sets had to be built in small pieces so they could fit through the doors. The change provides the ability to stage more lavish productions. Finally, large, open windows will allow students, faculty, staff and the public to have an intimate look at the inner workings of the Playhouse.

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