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Crazy for Theater, Even When It Sizzles

By CELIA MCGEE

THEY'RE big, they're sleek, they come from La Crosse, Wis., and they're the reason New York City Center will have its first summer season since Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia designated the former space of the Ancient Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine a performing arts center in 1943. At 350 tons of cooling capacity, the two Trane electric centrifugal chillers newly installed in the basement are part of a \$10 million, four-year overhaul that means Patti LuPone and Boyd Gaines can star in "Gypsy" in the previously stifling theater from July 9 through 29.

"The myth that everyone leaves New York in the summer" is just that, said Arlene Shuler, City Center's president.

New Yorkers have come to expect some theater with their warm weather for several decades, from Shakespeare in the Park to the Lincoln Center Festival, the Summer Play Festival or the Fringe. The tourist trade has also made June through August "Broadway's strongest season," said Jack Viertel, creative director of Jujamcyn Theaters. But only now are City Center, Symphony Space on the Upper West Side and two small theater companies venturing into the mix, and broadening the concept of summer-stock-in-the-city.

In previous years at Symphony Space summer was reserved for building projects, said its co-founder and artistic director, Isaiah Sheffer, "whether small or really big, like building our new building," which opened in March 2002. "At the very beginning we did a few plays," he said. "But we soon realized that if we wanted to have a monthly calendar of events, we couldn't do real theatrical runs, and we shifted our ambitions to our literary programming that got top actors involved. Once Molly Bloom says her final 'yes' in the annual Bloomsday marathon, our season was over."

Come July 11 at Symphony Space, however, James Naughton will kick off Summer Stock on Broadway by directing a cast led by Lois Smith, Cady Huffman and Larry Bryggman through Aug. 5 in the premiere of "Surface to Air," by David Epstein. The play centers on a family awaiting the return of a son's remains, 30 years after he was killed in Vietnam.

At City Center a more full-bodied summer version of the popular Encores! series will present "Gypsy," Ms. Shuler said, and will help demonstrate what she has wanted to drive home from the moment she came on board in 2003: "It's about the revitalization of City Center, and bringing it national recognition."

Tiny Algonquin Theater Productions, on the other hand, which will present the new musical "Sessions" by Albert Tapper, was merely looking for a centrally located stage, and the Peter Jay Sharp Theater at Playwrights Horizons provided the first available slot. "Sessions" opened on June 10 and runs through Aug. 18.

But the summer opening ended up working to the company's benefit. The rental fee was lower, and the possibility of downsizing the theater to 99 seats made for "an advantageous Equity contract," said Tony Sportiello, artistic director of Algonquin Theater Productions, "and we got breaks on advertising."

The Potomac Theater Project, on the other hand, relocating to New York after 20 years in the Washington area, only performs in the summertime. Its season at Atlantic Stage 2 on West 16th Street in Manhattan, which began Wednesday and runs through July 14, coincides with the summer hiatus at Middlebury College, where the group's co-founders,