



# Off Broadway, on Wisconsin Avenue

Set to open in September, the **Bethesda Theatre** will bring off-Broadway touring shows to Bethesda

By Virginia Myers / Photos by Hilary Schwab

**Bob Nederlander knows** theaters. As managing director of Nederlander Worldwide Entertainment, he oversees an empire of more than 30 live performance theaters in major cities in the United States and in London. The company's nine Broadway theaters currently host many of New York's hottest shows, including "Wicked," "Hairspray," "Rent" and "Legally Blonde."

In September, Nederlander Worldwide will welcome a new theater to the family. In Bethesda.

At 700 seats, the Bethesda Theatre at 7719 Wisconsin Ave. will be among the smallest of the Nederlander Theatres. But company officials hope it's the start of

something big. They plan on bringing off-Broadway touring shows to the Bethesda Theatre—and if the concept works as well as they expect it will, to other theatres in art-centric communities around the country.

Bob Nederlander says opening the first of these theaters in Bethesda was an easy choice. "When you think about all of the elements that go into an ideal theatrical market, I can't think of a better place to be for a theater of this size," he says.

The first show at the Bethesda Theatre will be "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change," which has been playing off-Broadway for 10 years. It opens Sept. 20, with a gala reception Sept. 24. Tickets are



on sale through Ticketmaster, which will have a location at the Bethesda Theatre box office.

The theater first opened in 1938 as a movie theater called the Boro, although the name was changed to the Bethesda Theatre within a year. The movie theater survived under many names, including the Bethesda Cinema 'N Draft House, until the early 1990s, and Bethesda Theatre Café until 2001. The theater, along with the Silver Theatre in Silver Spring (now home to the American Film Institute), was designed by renowned theater architect John Eberson and is one of the few remaining examples of art deco architecture in the area.

When the \$6.5 million renovation of the theater is completed this summer, many of the original art deco designs and flourishes will be restored, including brightly painted arches on interior walls, a sprinkling of starbursts on the carefully preserved ceiling, the landmark marquis and the exterior sign proclaiming “BETHESDA” in streamlined, 1930s-modern style.

Because the building is on the National Register of Historic Places, the Bozzuto Group, the owner of the building, was limited to its original footprint and required to preserve much of its original design. Among other things, archeological architects scraped, cleaned and analyzed interior paint to duplicate color and intensity for the designs painted on the walls. The trade-off: a \$950,000 Maryland Historical Trust’s Heritage Preservation tax credit, plus another \$675,000 from the state and \$1.88 million from Montgomery County. “I would call this a true public-private partnership to bring something that is hugely beneficial to not only Bethesda but the county and the state,” says Tom Baum, president of the Bozzuto Development Company.

### Looking forward

Ray Cullom, the theater’s executive director, stands in the swirling dust onstage and surveys the space, still, in late April, very much under construction. “Their jaws are



Roy Cullom, executive director of the Bethesda Theatre, says audiences’ “jaws are going to drop when they see this place.”

gonna drop when they see this place,” he says of the audiences he hopes will flock to the theater. The front of the house will have a bar and a café suitable for opening-night galas or socializing at intermission. Inside, 700 seats will face the proscenium stage and an orchestra pit. One of the biggest changes was the floor—originally set for audiences to look up at the silver screen, it now rakes slightly downward, so they look directly across or down at the stage. The film projection booth has become a technology center; the new stage will have a sprung floor, and an elevator will accommodate handicapped actors on their way to dressing rooms below.

The original stage was so small that even after expanding it, “backstage” dressing rooms must actually be “below stage.” The orchestra pit is miniature and can accommodate a maximum of just 16 musicians rather than the more common 32. Stage wings reach out into the audience seating and the stage can extend over the pit to accommodate deep sets and large casts, or it can contract for one-actor performances. Seating will fluctuate accordingly—from the full 700 seats down to 550. “There’s not going to be a bad seat in the house,” says Cullom, 41. “There’s not

going to be an audience member who’s more than 40 feet from the performers.”

Designing shows for such a space, says Cullom, may be challenging, “but in the end it will lead to much more creative sets.” And what the theater lacks in space it will make up for in state-of-the-art technology for lights and sound. That is one advantage to having deep pockets like *Nederlander’s*.

“In the end the audience is going to come in and see a beautiful building, a very comfortable space and a great show, and they’re not going to know anything about the limitations that we had to overcome to get a theater [in] here,” says Cullom. His confidence comes from experience: A performer, director and lighting designer in New York for almost 10 years, Cullom managed the old Theatre Row on West 42nd Street, and stuck with it during a major renovation of its five small theaters. He’s worked with Broadway tours as well, on shows like “Rent,” “Cabaret,” “Fosse,” “Oklahoma,” “Oliver!” and “Beauty and the Beast.”

### So, what’s playing?

Although he hasn’t finalized the first-year schedule, Cullom is sure he will mix it up, with some sure-fire, broad-appeal shows—



like the first one—chosen to attract a regional audience and others more narrowly focused, perhaps riskier. “I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change” is “a lovely four-person musical” that’s played in New York for 10 years with substantial commercial success, says Cullom. Called by one critic, “Seinfeld set to music,” the show is a sort of revue spanning the hilarity of dating, romance and marriage. Cullom is also considering a one-man comedy show for later in the season. He and Nederlander intend to keep most tickets “affordable,” around \$40 to \$45, and Cullom will target a “younger crowd,” of 25 and up.

“What’s great for us is that there has been an explosion in the type of product that is good for this theater, smaller shows, quirkier shows, more intelligent shows, commercial shows but of a smaller, more intimate nature that would go very well on this stage in this theater,” says Cullom. “Downtown [in Washington] they’re still going to do ‘Les Misérables’ and ‘The Producers’; that’s not what we’re looking to do.”

One possibility is taking shows that “have blown up beyond what they were intended to be” and bringing them back down to scale. Although he does not plan to present it, “Rent” is a perfect example: It opened in a 112-seat theater in the East Village and now it plays to 1,232 at the Nederlander Theatre on West 41st Street.

“There’s really a niche for this kind of theater in the market...to allow for productions of this kind, which are touring nationally, to come into Bethesda and the greater Washington area,” says Nederlander. Shows will run as long as they are successful—for months, if the audience supports them.

“...[E]ach and every one of them will be a show that would not be available to the folks here through a regional theater outlet or the Kennedy Center,” says Cullom. “[Each] will have what we’re calling a Broadway or an off-Broadway pedigree—shows that have been in New York, using New York talent...and by ‘New York’ I just mean professional people with a reputation who have done a lot of work.”

## It Almost Didn’t Happen

The remaking of the Bethesda Theatre hasn’t been without controversy. Six years ago, the Bozzuto Group, the heavyweight development and construction firm based in Greenbelt, began to transform the building with an 11-floor apartment building perched above the theater, and villa-style apartments and town houses behind. The Whitney, a \$75 million, 253-unit luxury residence, welcomed its first residents in 2003. The complex also includes 280 parking spaces for the residents and a 350-space public parking garage, the Cheltenham.

But Bozzuto was already working with the restoration of the theater in mind. To preserve its painted plaster ceiling, the firm and its development partner Smith Payes, LLC, installed five 80-foot-long steel trusses to carry the apartments above. Such preservation efforts, made in accordance with requirements for working with an historic landmark, were not enough for some.

Historians at the Art Deco Society of Washington insisted the building would lose its integrity with a new appendage, and challenged the theater’s listing on the National Register of Historic Places, claiming the apartments swallowed up the distinctive building. Restoration efforts were delayed until a state legislative committee tied a vote that could have erased the historic designation.

Such a change would have threatened the entire project with failure, as major funding was tied to its status as an historic property. “This wouldn’t have happened without support,” says Nederlander, referring to county and state financing. While the Maryland Historical Trust kicked in a \$950,000 tax credit, the National Park Service, when asked for \$1 million to support the preservation project, refused, saying that the apartment building stacked atop the theater disqualified the property. The state, however, disagreed, and provided another \$675,000; Montgomery County donated \$1.88 million.

“No question, the biggest challenge was the financing,” says Baum, pointing out that theaters are among the riskiest investments for bankers. “It’s very difficult to build a new venue and make it economically viable or self sustaining.” The Nederlander name is expected to be a major factor in making the theater a success—along with convenient location and existing community support for the arts.

Not that the theater won’t tap into the substantial talent in this region. If the show is a title out of New York, it will come with its own designers and directors, but other shows will be produced using some local talent. “We absolutely believe very deeply that the talent pool here is quite extensive in terms of designers and musicians and...performers,” says Cullom. Already audition notices for the first show have gone out not only in New York but locally as well. “It is our goal to have a nice mix of people with New York experience and some prominent or even up-and-coming local talent,” he says.

### Heavy backup

“It speaks volumes that a theatrical organization like Nederlander has chosen

the Washington region, especially Bethesda, in which to open up,” says Linda Levy Grossman, who runs the Washington-based Helen Hayes Awards program. “I think it’s an incredible opportunity, yet another wonderful venue to enrich our community as a theater town.” Like many involved in Washington area theater, Levy Grossman believes the new theater will stir up more interest in existing venues, rather than provide debilitating competition, and it will bring the top professionals the Nederlander name can attract. Even Round House Theatre, just blocks away, agrees: “We think it’s a great thing,” says artistic director Blake Robison. “The programming’s going to be significantly different from ours.” He agrees with Levy Grossman—“A rising tide floats all boats.”



“This is really going to benefit everyone,” says Theresa Cameron, CEO of the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County. “I think it’s going to bring people in that maybe would not come to Bethesda, and then they’ll go, ‘my gosh, there’s another theater here, let’s do this.’ The synergy of something like this really brings more people in to all the theaters.”

Cullom speaks of the project as a dynamic part of a quadruple feature that includes Bethesda Theatre, Round House, Strathmore and Imagination Stage. “The four organizations together are going to form a Bethesda arts district that I don’t think will have a parallel in the region,” he says. “We’re very lucky that the groundwork in this community has been laid by the arts organizations that were here already.” He mentions Round House

## The Nederlander Story

The New York-based Nederlander Worldwide is an entertainment conglomerate. In addition to its theaters, the company produces concerts for musicians like Barbra Streisand, Elton John and Sting; and sports operations including arena management and a partnership with the New York Yankees. They’ve produced everything from “Lolita” to “Jesus Christ Superstar,” presented everyone from Derek Jeter to Johnny Cash.

Founded in 1912 by David T. Nederlander at the Detroit Opera House, the family-owned and managed organization now boasts theaters across the United States, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Knoxville and Asheville, N.C. Internationally, Nederlander operates three theaters in London, and recently started an operation in Beijing, China.

Nederlander is the managing entity for Bethesda Theatre; the theatre is owned by the non-profit Bethesda Cultural Alliance, which includes Tom Baum of Bozzuto on its board of directors.

as especially influential in developing an audience now accustomed to attending quality theater.

“You have a community that is art-tuned, that is art-savvy, that has a great deal of interest,” Cullom says.

Adds Nederlander: “I can’t emphasize enough the great deal of interest that we have received from the community.” **B**

*Freelance editor and writer Virginia Myers lives in Takoma Park.*



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