

Houston's performing arts bid for cultural recognition

United Press International
HOUSTON — Houston, best known for its oil, Johnson Space Center, Astrodome and Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, also is pushing for recognition as a culture center.

Two major projects are under way.

Residents of Texas' largest city have raised \$43 million toward a planned \$75 million performing arts center to ease demands on opulent Jones Hall, opened just 17 years ago but overwhelmed by the arts explosion.

Although \$32 million short, leaders still hope to close the gap, break ground on the Wortham Theater Center this year, and open it in 1985.

Dominique de Menil, longtime Houston resident and heir to the Schlumberger oil well service fortune, will install her family's important art collection in a \$10 million, 100,000 square-foot museum she is building near downtown.

Workers already have broken ground for The Menil Museum, with the opening set for 1984. It will have a \$20 million endowment to manage a 10,000-piece collection of art and photographs ranging from classical Greek to Andy Warhol.

The nation's fifth largest city already is one of the few cities with major resident professional opera, ballet, symphony and theater.

Houston also has a big, well-supported Fine Arts Museum, Contemporary Arts Museum and smaller galleries, including the de Menil-sponsored Rothko Chapel, a tribute to the work of Mark Rothko.

Most of the major performing organizations (there are many active lesser groups filling out a busy Houston arts calendar)

are quite young. The symphony is 70 years old, but the opera company is just 27 years old and the ballet a youthful 13. The Alley Theatre is 35 years old.

While the symphony has been struggling, it is making a new bid for respect under the artistic direction of Sergiu Commissiona, a Romanian-born American whose longest association has been with the Baltimore Symphony.

Houston Grand Opera, under the direction of young David Gockley, is recognized as a major American company with

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a prize-winning production of Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" and four opera world premieres to its credit.

The opera's latest project is the world premiere in June of Leonard Bernstein's "A Quiet Place," a followup to his 1952 opera, "Trouble in Tahiti."

The Houston Ballet, under the direction of Ben Stevenson, a British-born former co-director of the National Ballet in Washington, has attracted national notice since Stevenson arrived in 1976.

The Alley Theatre, which prospered under the direction of founder Nina Vance, late director Iris Siff and current director Pat Brown, has its own sepa-

rate hall, a modernistic theater on Jesse Jones Plaza downtown.

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The three companies have to do an incredible juggling job to stay out of each other's way at Jones Hall, built for a mere \$9 million in 1965-66. Moving vans are constantly parked at the stage door of the shared theater.

They can hardly wait for opening of the new two-block theater center, which will span a city street and feature two theaters, one seating 2,300 and the other seating 1,100, plus a dozen rehearsal halls.

The opera and ballet will move to the new center. The symphony will stay in Jones Hall.

Although he is still far short of his goal, Lyric Theater Foundation Director Irl Mowery — with typical Houston optimism — believes the foundation can break ground with \$50 million, which would pay for the unfurnished building.

"The \$50 million is the nut, to assure the contract. Then we have another year to 18 months to raise the other \$25 million," he said.

They have hired former Texas Gov. John Connally as spokesperson to try to close the funding gap. Connally, a prominent Houston lawyer, has been holding luncheons and doing radio advertisements.

He calls upon Houstonians to

help provide the amenities Houston needs to fulfill its role as a "great world city."

"We must provide the amenities which that position requires," Connally argues.

City government has done its part, donating the valuable two square blocks of land adjacent to the Alley Theatre, Jones Hall and Houston Music Hall, the busy but unsatisfactory backup music hall.

Shell, Gulf and Conoco oil companies came through with a total of \$2 million in grants. Then some of Houston's Foundations — Wortham, Brown, Cullen and Fish — together chipped in \$26.5 million.

"There are other foundations from which we expect to get multimillion-dollar grants," Mowery said.

Mowery hopes to break ground in the late summer or early fall.

"I guess I really am just an incurable optimist about this project. I grew up in Houston. When you grow up here, you're an incurable optimist. Houston is not an ordinary city," Mowery said.

Why has Houston grown so rapidly in quality and quantity of arts activity, and why do people like Mowery see such a great future?

Mowery, Gockley, Stevenson and the others agree it helps to be headquarters for major oil, gas pipeline and insurance companies and a major port: "Money is a big factor. Everything takes money."



staff photo by Guy Hood

Diamond Darling drill

Fetching foul balls is one of the tasks Diamond Darlings have to perform at Texas A&M baseball games. Caught leaning over the fence at Olsen Field is Cindi Irving, a sophomore marketing major from Houston.

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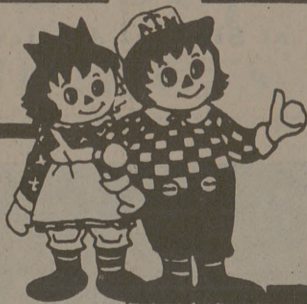
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