



SUSANNAH MARS AND GENE CHIN
AS 'DIANA' AND 'DOCTOR FINE' IN
NEXT TO NORMAL

A Second Act on Broadway

OREGON CONTEMPORARY THEATRE EMERGES

FROM LORD LEEBRICK WORDS BY ANNA GRACE / PHOTOS BY ATHENA DELENE

Dust is everywhere, cords are hanging from the ceiling and the space is buzzing with workers. I stand awestruck. I knew that a real, professional theater was being built in our beleaguered downtown Eugene, but I've wanted it too much to believe. Local playwright and retired judge Greg Foote shakes me out of my stupor, yelling, "Hand her a broom!" as he cheerfully mops past me.

Continuing my tour of the theater, I see state-of-the-art control rooms, skylit rehearsal spaces and a well-positioned scene shop. The lobby is stunning with soft colors and beautiful globes of light hanging from the ceiling, their radiance reflected in the polished cement floor. It feels like an honest professional theater, like they have in Portland or Ashland.

And it is. For nearly 20 years the Lord Leebrick Theatre Company wrestled inside the cocoon of the Charnelton space, and it has now emerged with a new name in a new space with a new production in tow. As of Jan. 25, theatergoers will see the new Oregon Contemporary Theatre (no relation to the former Portland company) company perform at the Lord/Leebrick Playhouse at 194 W. Broadway starting with the opening night of *Next to Normal*.

RISING ACTION

It was an easy Sunday morning in February 2009 when the Lord Leebrick Theatre Company Artistic Director Craig Willis and then-Board President Donald Van Houten sat in their respective homes in their respective pajamas, reading a story in the paper about groups interested in the 194 W. Broadway property. The two men set down the paper and reached for their phones. "I don't remember who called who," Willis says. "It was nearly simultaneous." But a connection ran through and the two hatched a plan to build a theater.

With enraged tango dancers (the popular Tango Center was displaced), a recession and countless city ordinances, the building of this theater has had more than its share of excitement. "Yes, I prefer my drama on the stage," Willis quips.

Set Designer Steen Mitchell credits Willis' perseverance through the dark days, "Craig's effort has made this happen. It takes vision and strong leadership." The pressures of leadership can be tough, even for someone who Van Houten describes as having "a striking combination of artistic and financial skills." Willis remarks, "The stress has at times been intense, for sure. I remember one time literally crying upon learning that we had received a federal stimulus grant."

While attempting to physically grow their space, the organization was expanding rapidly as well, the staff and the operating budget have more than tripled since Willis came on board. With their expanded space Oregon Contemporary Theatre (OCT) can run more classes and more summer camps. The next phase of development includes a 99-seat black box theater.

A SECOND ACT

There are so many perks to the new space: bona fide dressing rooms, well-lit and monitored parking just across the street, no train whistle going off in the midst of a dramatic scene, a sizable lobby in which you are not required to snuggle with strangers while getting your tickets. OCT has kept the three-quarter round format, but