



*Center Theatre Group production on the Mark Taper Forum stage
Photographs courtesy of Center Theatre Group*

CENTER THEATRE GROUP

With a trio of magnificent venues, 600 works, three Pulitzer Prizes, 18 Tony Awards and 45 years of world class theatre-making under its belt, Center Theatre Group certainly seems to have conquered its mission “to entertain, but also to provoke and to inspire”. Indeed, CTG is widely considered among the most successful and influential theatres in the nation.

Yet like so many of its peers in contemporary urban America, over the past generation or so CTG has struggled at times with the challenges of expanding and reaching new audiences, and making the theatre experience most interesting to and meaningful in the lives of young people and nontraditional audiences.

Until of course, came the Internet, ready – like CTG – to both provoke and inspire.

For Joe Carter, director of ticket sales and services at Center Theatre Group, the World Wide Web holds the key to the promise of both current and future audiences. “In order to thrive in today’s cultural climate,” he asserted on a recent weekday visit, “live theatre must tap into the Internet. It is imperative.”

To that end, Carter has led a five-year effort to dramatically update and deepen CTG’s Internet presence, creating a fun, interactive, multi-purpose site that dignifies the integral nature of the Internet in our daily lives, and that taps into the cultural “psyche” of a new generation.

From the comfort of their own home computers, theatergoers can now wholly immerse themselves in a virtual world where information about and insight into the performances being staged at the Kirk Douglas and the Ahmanson Theatres and the Mark Taper Forum are abundant. Viewers can see live-action scenes from dress rehearsals, download still photos, read about the historical background of plays, and learn the most fascinating of tidbits about the casts and crews. They can blog about their theatergoing experiences, and even read comments from the actors themselves. And, perhaps most appealing to prospective patrons, the site features a tool that imagines the view to the stage from any seat in the house.



Kirk Douglas Theatre

Not surprisingly, discussions among staff about the look of the site were passionate and spirited. “Everyone had a different idea about what the site should look like and how it should represent the work that we do,” said Liz Lin, director of donor communications. “It really forced us to take a close look at what we do and why we’re here.”

The effort was worthwhile. Since the main components of the site went active a year ago, online ticket purchases have jumped from 40 percent to 60 percent of all sales. CTG is tapping into that traffic boost, tracking the online behavior of visitors to the site and sending out email blasts quickly and efficiently. Print-at-home tickets and ebay-style auctions for memorabilia are soon to come and, suspect CTG’s leaders, will likely generate a great deal of public interest.

In addition to ticket sales and public interest in the plays, an unexpected outcome of CTG’s heightened Internet presence has been increased support for its arts education program, Performing for Los Angeles Youth, also known as PLAY. Each year for nearly four decades, PLAY has commissioned, produced and toured professional plays for young audiences, and distributed free or low cost tickets to CTG mainstage productions. Both inspirational and provocative, performance-related workshops and conferences are held for teachers and students alike, enhancing their understanding of and interest in theatre. Carter hopes the group’s new Web presence will further strengthen the theatre’s bond with the next generation of patrons; exposure to PLAY programming is already bringing younger fans to the site. “The more we can engage teens and younger patrons, the better off we’ll be down the road,” he said.

Clearly, such advances are key to the viability of the largest theatre company on the West Coast, yet the work is far from done. CTG’s next challenge is to overcome the widely held misperception that its plays are corporate productions like the concerts and spectacles staged at places the Nokia Theatre or Staples Center. Many theatergoers are unaware that Center Theatre Group—a nearly half-century old non-profit community institution—exists, much less mounts our region’s most lauded productions.

“Our enhanced Web site”, noted Lin, “is a great way to get patrons to equate the high-quality productions staged, with the nonprofit organization whose work makes them possible.” And with support from The Ahmanson Foundation, CTG’s Web site, like theatre itself, will be ever-evolving.