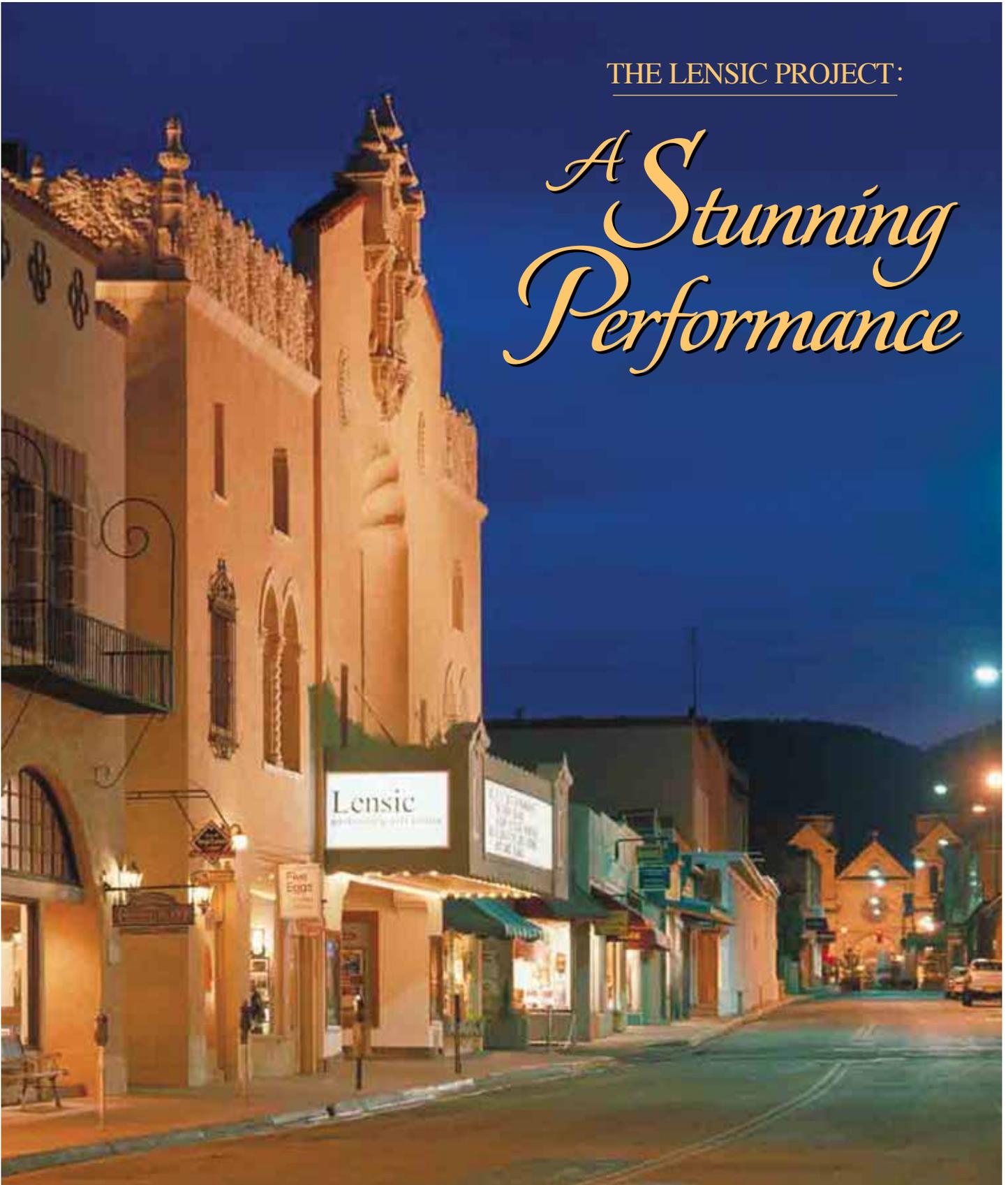


THE LENSIC PROJECT:

*A Stunning
Performance*



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The \$9.2 million capital campaign to transform a 70-year old movie theater into an elegant, multifaceted performing arts center was an extraordinary success – not only in its fulfillment, but in the vitality that it brings to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Built in the 1930s by the Salmon family, in collaboration with son-in-law E. John Greer Sr., the Lensic first opened on June 24, 1931 with a showing of the movie *Daddy Long Legs*. Film and vaudeville were its original offerings. Grandeur and princely décor were its first impressions. Following a premiere of the film *Santa Fe Trail*, starring Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland, a reporter characterized the Lensic as "the most splendid theater in the West."

By the 1950s, however, less public forums of entertainment took the stage. Television and drive-in theaters gave the older movie palaces increased competition. Over the next several decades, the theater drew crowds by booking only

the most sensational films of the day, such as the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night*, Julie Andrews' *The Sound of Music*, George Lucas' *Star Wars* and its sequel *The Empire Strikes Back*.

Even as it passed through a series of movie management companies, many Santa Fe citizens understood that the Lensic could not remain solely a theater and live to serve another generation. It needed more than restoration; it needed a new beginning.

On the Scene

When Nancy Zeckendorf heard that the Lensic's founding family might be interested in seeing the theater returned to its former prominence, she knew very well what the project would entail – significant time, energy, and know-how, along with strong financial support from the community. Nancy had just led a successful campaign for The Santa Fe



Opera. As a former dancer with The Metropolitan Opera and The Santa Fe Opera, Nancy possessed personal experience regarding the practicalities of giving new life to the Lentic.

Along with her husband, Bill Zeckendorf, who added his expertise from years as a real estate developer in New York, the Zeckendorfs were the perfect team to undertake this multi-million dollar campaign. "The minute I mentioned the Lentic opportunity to Bill, he was on the phone making things happen," said Nancy.

The thought of turning the Lentic into a modern performing arts center had been a long-time dream of many Santa Fe residents. There had been previous attempts, but all the necessary ingredients for true success had never arrived in one place at one time. With the Zeckendorfs' expertise, eight primary arts groups desperately in need of performance space, and a growing acceptance by the city and policy makers that the project was good business for Santa Fe, the time had come (again) for the Lentic.

"People had been talking about this for decades. My greatest concern was that someone would begin the process without recognizing how important it was for the theater adaptations to include all the performing arts," said Nancy.

One of the first hurdles was to secure an agreement with the Greer family for a 75-year lease and then to buy out the previous management group, United Artist. Bill Zeckendorf accomplished this formidable task with characteristic perseverance and finesse. Added Nancy, "The family, especially Greer niece, Alexis Girard, who oversees Greer Enterprises, was very supportive throughout the process."

Another major milestone was securing a competent and hardworking campaign board. "Santa Fe does not have a wealth of big banks and corporations. Yet we knew that for

this project, virtually all of the financial support would come from the community. My husband played a major role in selecting an extremely gifted and experienced board. These were all individuals who knew how to get things done in various sectors: city planning, banking, real estate, contracting, architecture, and so on. Bill also found a brilliant contractor who enabled us to achieve almost miraculous changes to the Lentic, including the monumental task of raising the ceiling and pushing back one wall – and he managed to do this on time and within budget," Nancy added.

Projecting a Voice

After an initial assessment of over \$8 million, the campaign goal increased as new opportunities came to light. One of the most important adjustments was the addition of an Acoustical Control System. Unlike mere amplification, the \$350,000 system picks up sound from the stage area and redistributes it throughout the theater. In a manner of speaking, it changes the interior space to conform to any particular performance. The acoustical needs for a poetry reading will vary greatly from that of an orchestral concert. The sound distribution for an opera production will be quite different than that of a film presentation. With the purchase of the ACS, the Lentic can truly be all things to all performances. Santa Fe is only the second North American venue to feature this system, created in the Netherlands. Said Nancy, "We received special gifts for this purchase and other unex-



pected adjustments, including a \$250,000 component to paint and restore the theater's ornate interior – raising our sights above \$9 million."

"We really needed and received the city's full cooperation. In order to increase the height of the theater and push back one wall, we needed a nod from the city. They couldn't have been more supportive," Said

Nancy. "They willingly blocked off streets and opened up the way for access to the building during construction. In addition, we received two gifts from the city for the project—a gift of \$200,000 and a low-interest loan that represented a significant gift in and of itself."

The Lentic's downtown location helped to sweeten this private-public collaboration. As with so many downtown



areas, this one needed some reviving. A renewal of the Lensic would be a catalyst for fresh interest downtown. It would be a boon for business and enhance the cultural opportunities for all of Santa Fe's citizens. By championing this cause for a downtown renewal, Joe Schepps, a realtor and vice president of the Lensic board, was able to raise one million dollars among businesses. A pedestrian walkway, current talk of a new hotel, a gain in municipal parking and a noticeable increase in the number of people coming into the area are just a few of the most recent effects of the campaign.

The Lensic reopened in April of 2001 and ran in the black in its first year. The facility is rented to presenters, rather than the theater serving as a promoter. The eight primary groups substantiating the original need for performance space includes: Institute for Spanish Arts, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Santa Fe Concert Association, Santa Fe Desert Chorale, The Santa Fe Opera, Santa Fe Pro Musica, Santa Fe Stages and Santa Fe Symphony and Chorus. Prior to the Lensic's transformation, these groups were renting less than adequate auditoriums and facing logistical nightmares. When it came time to raise the curtain on the new Lensic, no one applauded with more conviction than the members and supporters of these eight organizations.

"One of the groups has increased ticket sales 67% in one year. Almost every performance at the Lensic is now sold out. The garage across the street is doing 100% better business at night. The city is pleased. The citizens are pleased and the performers are ecstatic," said Nancy. "Not only has the Lensic provided new opportunities for performing arts groups, but it extends this cultural enrichment to children of our community. Public schools use the Lensic as an extension of the classroom – offering performance art and culture

to the children of Santa Fe. The elegance and restoration of the theater inspires performers to achieve more than they ever have. It has clearly raised the bar on all performances."

Nancy recalled a significant day in the campaign: "I knew before we started, back in 1998, that we needed a strong lead gift. My husband and I spoke with a couple early in the process to begin dialogue about the campaign. Without waiting for a second meeting, the person offered to give us one million dollars once we raised three million. We were also working on a Mabee grant and waiting to hear a re-sponse from that foundation and, of course, continuing to raise money from local foundations, businesses and individuals. After waiting nine months to hear back about a million-dollar gift that would meet our \$3-million goal and give us access to the \$1 million matching gift, I began to have a little anxiety about the delay. Then, on the same day that I heard about our \$650,000 grant from the Mabee Foundation, I also received a call from the donor confirming his gift of \$1 million. That was certainly a day to remember."

Finale

The campaign finished off its capital component with two \$2 million-dollar gifts, three gifts of \$500-650,000, four gifts of \$300-400,000, ten gifts of \$100-200,000, and 40 gifts of \$25,000 or more, along with many smaller gifts. "If I'd known the final goal would be over \$9 million, I might never have started. Yet, as I look back, I'm glad I was involved in this wonderful work. Our campaign consultant, Susan Thomas, CFRE, helped direct our efforts. We always had great consensus and community backing. I have never been involved in something so wholeheartedly supported."

With such success behind them, it is not surprising that the Lensic's newest goal is an endowment equal to its stature. With a history as significant as Santa Fe's Lensic Performing Arts Center, it deserves both an endowed and enduring future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - *Denise Rhoades is a free-lance writer living in Newton, Kan. Denise has worked on several projects for Hartsook Companies and regularly writes campaign case statements and articles for Hartsook clients.*

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