



ON THE BEAT

Ensemble Moving to Victoria Hall Theater

MULTI \$\$\$ REDO: The 31-year-old Ensemble Theatre Company plans to begin a major renovation of its future home at the Victoria Hall Theater early next year.

After about a year of interior reconstruction at what it has dubbed The New Vic on West Victoria Street, Ensemble will be leaving its longtime, cozy but inadequate Alhecama Theatre at 914 Santa Barbara Street.

"If all went extremely smoothly, we could begin work in the first part of 2011," Derek Westen, Ensemble boardmember and campaign chair, told me. They would be able to stage at least one or two plays at the Vic in 2012 after beginning that season at Alhecama.

The New Vic will have nearly 300 seats in stadium style, compared with Alhecama's 141, and, as a side benefit, will allow scheduling for community music, dance, and other performance events and the Santa Barbara International Film Festival.

In an interview this week, Westen declined to provide a cost estimate of the multimillion-dollar project, pending fine-tuning, but said that many community leaders and philanthropists are already involved in the capital and endowment campaign, including Sara Miller McCune, Michael and Anne Towbes, Barry and Jean Schuyler, and honorary campaign chair Léni Fé Bland. There's already been "great progress," Westen said, and the City of Santa Barbara has committed \$1 million in redevelopment funds.

Naming rights for the theater are up for grabs. Price: \$2.5 million.

With the way cleared after a delay due to litigation, Ensemble now has a 30-year lease. The Santa Barbara architectural firm PMSM, which did the Granada Theatre's interior and the Music Academy of the West's outstanding Hahn Hall, has been retained, while Frank Schipper Construction has been hired for pre-construction services. The building, a former church, is owned by three nonprofits, CALM, RSVP, and Unity Shoppe. The latter will be able to hold its annual Unity Telethon without being charged for use of the theater, Westen said.

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The Vic's current interior will be gutted, Westen said. The new stadium seating will integrate the present balcony. The stage will be deeper, and a small orchestra pit will be provided. Bathrooms will be relocated, and the lobby will be enlarged to about the size of Hahn Hall's. A state-of-the-art projection booth will be built for films. Because these changes are planned for the interior only, Planning Commission and City Council approval are not required, according to Westen.

Jonathan Fox, executive artistic director, has been given a long-term contract. Ensemble will build sets and rehearse offsite, meaning that it can do up to six plays a season instead of its current five and still make the theater available for other performance groups, Westen said.