

= Harris Theater (Chicago) =

The Joan W. and Irving B. Harris Theater for Music and Dance (also known as the Harris Theater for Music and Dance , the Harris & Harris Theater or , most commonly , the Harris Theater) is a 1,525 seat theater for the performing arts located along the northern edge of Millennium Park on Randolph Street in the Loop community area of Chicago in Cook County , Illinois , US . The theater , which is largely underground due to Grant Park related height restrictions , was named for its primary benefactors , Joan and Irving Harris . It serves as the park 's indoor performing venue , a complement to Jay Pritzker Pavilion , which hosts the park 's outdoor performances .

Constructed in 2002 ? 2003 , it provides a venue for small and medium sized music and dance groups , which had previously been without a permanent home and were underserved by the city 's performing venue options . Among the regularly featured local groups are Joffrey Ballet , Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and Chicago Opera Theater . It provides subsidized rental , technical expertise , and marketing support for the companies using it , and turned a profit in its fourth fiscal year .

The Harris Theater has hosted notable national and international performers , such as the New York City Ballet 's first visit to Chicago in over 25 years (in 2006) . The theater began offering subscription series of traveling performers in its 2008 ? 2009 fifth anniversary season . Performances through this series have included the San Francisco Ballet , Mikhail Baryshnikov , and Stephen Sondheim .

The theater has been credited as contributing to the performing arts renaissance in Chicago , and has been favorably reviewed for its acoustics , sightlines , proscenium and for providing a home base for numerous performing organizations . Although it is seen as a high caliber venue for its music audiences , the theater is regarded as less than ideal for jazz groups because it is more expensive and larger than most places where jazz is performed . The design has been criticized for traffic flow problems , with an elevator bottleneck . However , the theater 's prominent location and its underground design to preserve Millennium Park have been praised . Although there were complaints about high priced events in its early years , discounted ticket programs were introduced in the 2009 ? 10 season .

= = Background and construction = =

The Harris Theater was built to fill the need for a modern performance venue in downtown Chicago , which would be a new home for previously itinerant performing arts companies . Such troupes were never sure from year to year where they would be able to perform ; for example , the Chicago Tribune reported in 1993 that six dance companies lost their performance space during renovations at the Civic Opera House . The need for a new theater was identified by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in a 1990 study ; the new venue had to be flexible , affordable , and technically and physically " state of the art " . Once the need was identified , the theater was the culmination of " years of planning by Chicago 's philanthropic , arts , business and government leaders " including groups like Music of the Baroque , which now perform there regularly . The plan also extended Chicago 's performing arts district , which had been predominantly west of Michigan Avenue , east towards Lake Michigan , and linked it more with the Museum Campus and Michigan Avenue cultural institutions .

The Harris Theater is in Grant Park , which lies between Lake Michigan to the east and the Loop to the west , and has been Chicago 's front yard since the mid 19th century . Grant Park 's northwest corner , north of Monroe Street and the Art Institute , east of Michigan Avenue , south of Randolph Street , and west of Columbus Drive , had been Illinois Central rail yards and parking lots until 1997 , when it was made available for development by the city as Millennium Park . As of 2007 , Millennium Park trails only Navy Pier as a Chicago tourist attraction .

In 1836 , a year before Chicago was incorporated , the Board of Canal Commissioners held public auctions for the city 's first lots . Foresighted citizens , who wanted the lakefront kept as public open

space , convinced the commissioners to designate the land east of Michigan Avenue between Randolph Street and Park Row (11th Street) " Public Ground ? A Common to Remain Forever Open , Clear and Free of Any Buildings , or Other Obstruction , whatever . " Grant Park has been " forever open , clear and free " since , protected by legislation that has been affirmed by four previous Illinois Supreme Court rulings . In 1839 , United States Secretary of War Joel Roberts Poinsett declared the land between Randolph Street and Madison Street east of Michigan Avenue " Public Ground forever to remain vacant of buildings " .

Aaron Montgomery Ward , who is known both as the inventor of mail order and the protector of Grant Park , twice sued the city of Chicago to force it to remove buildings and structures from Grant Park and to keep it from building new ones . In 1890 , arguing that Michigan Avenue property owners held easements on the park land , Ward commenced legal actions to keep the park free of new buildings . In 1900 , the Illinois Supreme Court concluded that all landfill east of Michigan Avenue was subject to dedications and easements . In 1909 , when he sought to prevent the construction of the Field Museum of Natural History in the center of the park , the courts affirmed his arguments . As a result , the city has what are termed the Montgomery Ward height restrictions on buildings and structures in Grant Park ; structures over 40 feet (12 m) tall are not allowed in the park , with the exception of bandshells . Therefore , the theater is mostly underground , while the adjacent Jay Pritzker Pavilion was described as a work of art to dodge the height restriction .

The theater is named for its primary benefactors , Joan and Irving Harris , who gave a gift of \$ 15 million gift (\$ 19 @. @ 7 million in current dollars) and a \$ 24 million (\$ 31 @. @ 6 million) construction loan to the Music and Dance Theater Chicago ; this was believed to be largest single monetary commitment ever to a performing arts organization in Chicago . The Harris family had a long history of philanthropy benefitting the arts .

The Harris Theater was designed by Thomas Beeby of Hammond Beeby Rupert Ainge Architects ; his previous work in Chicago includes the Harold Washington Library Center and the Art Institute of Chicago Building 's Rice Wing . Thornton Tomasetti was the structural engineer . The building is located on ground leased from the City of Chicago , and cost \$ 52 @. @ 7 million (\$ 67 @. @ 8 million in current dollars) . Construction began on February 1 , 2002 , and the theater opened for use on November 8 , 2003 .

= = Architecture = =

The above @-@ ground entrance to the Harris Theater is a glass @-@ walled lobby at 205 E. Randolph Street , which spans several metallic and neon floors in what the Chicago Tribune 's Pulitzer Prize @-@ winning architecture critic Blair Kamin describes as " a multistory shaft of space that explodes downward from street level " . The theater and adjacent Millennium Park Garage are located mostly underground , with a passage connecting them . Kamin also notes that the theater 's underground design and the Millennium Park Garage entrance causes many theater goers to miss the spatial grandeur of the lobby , and has led to complaints about the time it takes to descend the many stairs to the theater . The theater has a rooftop terrace that is available for private events .

The Harris Theater is located beneath and directly north of the Jay Pritzker Pavilion , Millennium Park 's outdoor performance venue . The theater and pavilion were built adjacent to each other at about the same time , with the benefit that they share a loading dock , rehearsal rooms and other backstage facilities . The entire auditorium is in a cube 100 feet (30 @. @ 5 m) on a side , so all the seats are relatively close to the stage . The seating capacity is 1525 , with approximately 600 main floor seats , 500 raised orchestra level seats and 400 balcony seats . The modern orchestra pit , which can be closed , accommodates 45 musicians . The seats are maplewood ; carpeting and walls have a muted color scheme ? blacks , charcoals and grays . Kamin felt the modest palette is appropriate for a modest structure that attempts to complement the exuberant neighboring pavilion .

The proscenium is 30 feet (9 @. @ 1 m) high and is flanked by 75 @-@ foot (22 @. @ 9 m) steel reflector towers to help focus sound . The stage is both 45 feet (13 @. @ 7 m) wide and deep , with 75 feet (22 @. @ 9 m) of flyspace above . The offstage right distance is 26 feet (7 @. @ 9 m) , while offstage left is 27 feet 10 inches (8 @. @ 5 m) . The theater 's sightlines and acoustics

provide " an unusually modern and stainless @-@ steel bolstered environment " for experiencing performances according to the Centerstage City Guide .

The original design planned for most theater patrons to enter the theater from the underground parking garage , but the success of Millennium Park and neighboring businesses has caused most attendees to enter at street level . The design 's limited elevator service has caused bottlenecks for street level patrons . Additional elevators and escalators , which would require special dedicated funding , have been considered . The initial construction leaked and did not protect some non @-@ public spaces from water exposure ; this cost Chicago taxpayers \$ 1 million for repairs in 2008 .

= = Performers and Events = =

The Harris Theater is a privately owned institution serving mostly local mid @-@ size non @-@ profit arts companies and projects , including those , like Old Town School of Folk Music , which sponsor touring artists . The theater provides subsidized rental , technical expertise , and marketing support , and underwrites over two @-@ thirds of the daily usage costs for its non @-@ profit users while providing marketing , box office , front of house , and technical services at no extra charge . As of 2008 , the theater was used on average 262 days a year for 112 different performances with audiences at about 65 percent of capacity .

= = = Local performers = = =

When the Harris Theater opened , it served as the home venue for a dozen founding music and dance groups : Ballet Chicago , Chicago Opera Theater , Chicago Sinfonietta , The Dance Center of Columbia College Chicago , Hubbard Street Dance Chicago , Joffrey Ballet of Chicago , Lyric Opera Center for American Artists , Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum , Muntu Dance Theatre of Chicago , Music of the Baroque , Old Town School of Folk Music , and Performing Arts Chicago . After the 2003 opening , small dance companies aspired to perform in the state @-@ of @-@ the @-@ art theater ; one such troupe , Luna Negra Dance Theater , achieved its goal and performed there in 2006 and 2007 .

In 2010 , Frommer 's noted that the major local dance troupes performing regularly at the theater included Columbia College Chicago , Hubbard Street , Joffrey , Muntu , and River North Dance Company . The 2009 edition of Fodor 's cited Music of the Baroque 's seven performances at the Harris Theater each year . The theater also hosts Grant Park Music Festival events that include a few free seats . According to the 2005 Frommer 's Irreverent Guide to Chicago , by providing a regular performing venue , the Harris Theater has also " raised the profile of local dance groups " in Chicago .

The attempt to facilitate modest @-@ sized performance groups has been recognized by philanthropists ; both the Chicago @-@ based John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the New York @-@ based Andrew W. Mellon Foundation have provided grants to the theater . For example , in 2009 the MacArthur Foundation gave the theater \$ 150 @, @ 000 over three years " in support of a subsidized usage program for smaller arts organizations " .

= = = Visiting performers = = =

In the fall of the 2006 ? 07 season , the Harris Theater hosted the New York City Ballet for five days of performances that marked the company 's first visit to Chicago in over 25 years . This presentation grossed \$ 2 @. @ 3 million and enticed 600 new donors to support the theater , which netted \$ 800 @, @ 000 for operations and rental subsidies for its resident troupes . This contributed to the theater 's first year of profitability in fiscal year 2007 ; it had net income of \$ 1 @. @ 3 million on revenues of \$ 8 @. @ 2 million . In July 2007 , Mikhail Baryshnikov made his first visit to Chicago as a performer in seven years , with two shows at the theater .

The theater began to present its own music series of touring groups in its fifth season (2008 ? 09) , which put it in competition with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra 's " Symphony Center Presents " .

series and Chicago 's Auditorium Theatre . The " Harris Theater Presents " series was in addition to programs by its numerous resident performing arts groups . The theater 's music series for the 2008 ? 09 season included a five @-@ concert classical music series and a three @-@ performance dance series by the San Francisco Ballet and the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company . The San Francisco Ballet is America 's oldest professional ballet troupe , and was on a widely publicized four @-@ city 75th anniversary celebration tour . Many of the performers for the Harris Theater 's first subscription series were internationally acclaimed artists .

The lineup for the Harris Theater 's 2009 ? 10 second subscription season included Mikhail Baryshnikov , Lang Lang , Kathleen Battle and Stephen Sondheim . Harris theater has been involved in hosting the Chicago International Film Festival . Prior to 2008 , the Chicago Theatre had hosted the annual opening @-@ night film of the festival , but that year the festivities were moved to the Harris Theater .

The theater has hosted several successful jazz performances , including Nicholas Payton 's comeback and the first indoor Chicago show by the Portuguese fado singer Mariza . In 2005 , the theater hosted the 14th annual Jazz Dance World Congress , and the following year it hosted " Imagine Tap ! " , a show that featured an array of tap dance styles .

= = Reception = =

The Harris Theater has been the subject of numerous reviews , which are probably best summed up by the Chicago Tribune 's architecture critic Blair Kamin , who describes it as a " solid , though not unqualified , success " , while giving it a two star rating (out of a possible four) . Among the foibles that he notes were the off @-@ putting industrial aesthetics , mundane concrete @-@ framing , under @-@ refined modest palette and blunt entrance . However , Kamin praises the spacious lobby and the theater 's underground design as a concession to preserve the green lakefront .

Kamin also praises the design of the proscenium and the venue 's sightlines and acoustics , which also drew praise from Tribune journalist Howard Reich and Chicago Sun @-@ Times journalist Wynne Delacoma . Reich , who notes that the theater has a wonderful stage , describes the theater as a blessing for both audiences and arts organizations because its high profile confers " instant prominence and credibility to musicians and presenters " . Reich feels it is a less than perfect jazz music venue because of its " cavernous " size and high rental cost (\$ 4 @, @ 750 in 2008 , plus costs for stagehands) . Nonetheless , Delacoma describes it as " an astonishingly beautiful place to listen to music . Its acoustics cradle sound like a velvet @-@ lined jewel box . "

Tribune journalist Chris Jones credits the theater 's founding as part of Chicago 's performing arts renaissance , and praises it as " the only major Chicago arts building with a long @-@ term commitment to equal partnerships " with its performance groups . Another Tribune journalist , John von Rhein , describes the theater as a boon to the performing groups that it serves , and praises it for being state @-@ of @-@ the @-@ art . He also notes that because of the theater 's success it is able " to present an increasing number of risky , sometimes boundary @-@ busting events the likes of which audiences will hear nowhere else in the area " .

However , von Rhein notes that the theater 's size poses a challenge to the performers attempting to fill its seats , and feels that it overemphasizes high @-@ priced events . In 2009 ? 2010 , the theater introduced a pair of discounted ticket programs : a five dollar lunchtime series of 45 @-@ minute dance performances , and a discounted ten dollar ticket program was initiated for in @-@ person , cash @-@ only purchases in the last 90 minutes before performances .

The theater has been recognized with the 2002 American Architecture Award , and the 2005 American Institute of Architects Chicago Institutional Design Excellence Award . In 2008 , Joan Harris was recognized with a National Arts Award from Americans for the Arts for her arts leadership and achievement , exemplified in part by funding the Harris Theater with her late husband .