

Westwood's Crest Theater to be reborn as UCLA Nimoy Theater, an experimental performance space



Brett Steele, left, dean of the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture, and Kristy Edmunds, director of UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

BY CAROLINA A. MIRANDA COLUMNIST
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For years, Kristy Edmunds, director of UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance, has cruised by the old Crest Theater on Westwood Boulevard on her way to and from work.

"I'd go past the Crest and I kept feeling, 'There is *something* there,'" she says. "I kept thinking, 'I wonder if I can get in there.'"

In 2015 she did get in — for a night — when she arranged a performance by singer-songwriter Somi in the space, which was built in 1940 and designated a cultural landmark in 2008.

"It was a music concert, small and informal," she remembers. But it planted a seed. "I thought, 'Man, I wish we could do more here.'"

Now Edmunds will be doing a lot.

On Thursday, UCLA will formally announce the acquisition of the Crest and rename it the UCLA Nimoy Theater, in honor of the late philanthropist and “Star Trek” icon Leonard Nimoy. Serving as a lead patron on the project is his widow, actress and director Susan Bay Nimoy, who has contributed an undisclosed sum to get the project off the ground.

“Leonard would love that it’s there,” says Nimoy, who grew up near the theater. “His greatest joy was performing in theater. He loved that so much more than film and television. The lights go down and people are moving around on that stage and it’s so exciting.”

Also involved is an anonymous donor, who in addition to giving an undisclosed sum, has established a \$2.5-million matching grant fund to support needed renovations.

CAP UCLA currently holds most of its performances at the university’s Royce Hall, which seats 1,800 people and can require up to three years of advance notice to book. The Crest, which seats about 300, will allow for more intimate and more spontaneous events.

“It has flexibility,” Edmunds says. “It allows a range of work, including digital film, live cinema and music — and it allows us to work with certain kinds of dance forms. We’ll have spoken word.”

Plus, the Crest offers a location that takes CAP off campus — which is buffered by a ring road and acres of parking — and places it in the middle of L.A.’s urban fabric.

“One of the big projects at UCLA is for us to operate in more public settings,” says Brett Steele, who is dean of the art and architecture school and oversees the university’s public arts organizations, including the Hammer, the Fowler Museum and CAP UCLA. “For a public research university that sees civic engagement as part of a larger mission, this is a physical embodiment of that.”



A view of the Crest Theater on Westwood Boulevard. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

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— **Brett Steele, dean of UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture**

The theater, which Steele and Edmunds estimate will be operational by 2021, anticipates a number of important urban changes to the area. By 2020, the [redesign of the nearby Hammer Museum](#) by architect Michael Maltzan will not only add square footage to the museum, but make the building's sterile facade more appealing at street level. Plus, there is the planned extension of the [Metro Purple Line](#) to Westwood (for which no date is set) that will infuse the area with added pedestrian life.

"The Crest is part of the larger geography of the Westside," Steele says. "This project will begin the reality of testing what the borders are moving beyond the 400 acres of this campus."

CAP UCLA has already experimented with performances all over greater L.A., including the Actors' Gang theater in Culver City, the Ford Theatres in Hollywood and [a much-discussed work inspired by "Hamlet"](#) that involved sheep and herding dogs at Will Rogers State Historic Park.

And for the last two years, CAP has regularly held events at the Theater at the Ace Hotel in downtown L.A. "The first work that we ever presented there," says Edmunds, "60% of the people who came were not on our database."

Part of being a cultural institution in a decentralized city, it turns out, is to be decentralized yourself.

It's an idea L.A. institutions have long adopted. The Museum of Contemporary Art operates three exhibition spaces, including a gallery at the Pacific Design Center in West Hollywood. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art has a gallery at Charles White Elementary School in Westlake and is developing [another satellite location](#) in South Los Angeles. The Center Theatre Group, based at the Music Center downtown, runs the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City.

The Music Center has also staged programs outside of its downtown home. In fact, it's currently collaborating with CAP UCLA on an upcoming dance performance, ["The Great Tamer"](#) by Dimitris Papaioannou, to be held at Royce Hall in January.

"We're not just the white castle on the hill for the few and the privileged," says Rachel Moore, president of the Music Center. "We want people to come to the Music Center, but we also need to reach out in different ways."

Even after the Crest reopens as the Nimoy, CAP UCLA will continue to present work around L.A. But the new theater will provide the center with a more informal (and easier to book) space, a site for emerging artists and intimate artist talks.

"Certain architecture is for certain kinds of creative ideas," Edmunds says. "Like in the visual arts, we would never ask someone to expand their painting by three yards to fill a space. Not all things warrant a large space."

The project will also resuscitate one of L.A.'s vintage theaters.

The Crest, which began life as the Westwood Theatre, has been known as the UCLAN Theatre (for its proximity to UCLA) and the Metro Theater. Its architecture also has evolved: in the '80s, its Modern facade was retooled for a more Art Deco look.

Nimoy could not be more pleased to play a part in its next evolution.

"Leonard and I used to go to the Crest Theater to see movies," she says. "Now it will be a multidisciplinary art space. All these things from A to Z will take place in there. It will be a buffet. You never know what you're going to get."