

# Curtains Going Up at the Taper and Ahmanson

BY CECIL SMITH

● What began vaguely and uncertainly 30 years ago with the notion that Los Angeles should justify its position as a metropolitan center with some sort of civic auditorium for the performing arts this week becomes a reality far beyond the dreams of those early proponents with the completion and formal opening of the final two buildings of The Music Center.

Taking their places beside the stately Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Welton Becket's trinity of theaters are the 750-seat oval Mark Taper Forum and the 2,100-seat Ahmanson, linked by a colonnade that not only joins them structurally but symbolizes their unity of purpose.

The new theaters will be opened with a week of dedicatory ceremonies and performances beginning tonight with a special invitational performance of the Center Theatre Group's inaugural production of John Whiting's "The Devils" in the Mark Taper Forum. Prior to the performance, the theater will be dedicated in a ceremony at which CTG president Lew Wasserman will preside and Mayor Reagan and Supervisor Ernest E. Debs will participate. Other participants include CTG adviser Robert Whitehead, general director Elliot Martin, artistic director Gordon Davidson, financier Mark Taper, architect Welton Becket and Mrs. Norman Chandler, leader of the campaign that made the \$40 million Music Center complex possible.

The Ahmanson will be dedicated Wednesday night in a ceremony prior to the opening performance of the musical drama, "Man of La Mancha," which also officially opens the 1967 Los Angeles Civic Light Opera season. Presiding will be L.A.C.L.O. president William T. Sesson Jr. Participants will include actress Greer Garson, actor Gregory Peck, Assembly Speaker Jesse Unruh, financier Howard Ahmanson, Supervisor Debs, Becket and Mrs. Chandler. Each subsequent night through Saturday, pre-performance ceremonies will be held in the Ahmanson with county, city and state officials and civic leaders participating.

In keeping with the dedication week of the new theaters, a special concert of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Zubin Mehta will be

presented this afternoon in the Pavilion. The Metropolitan Opera National Company will open two weeks of repertory in the Pavilion Monday night with the performance of "La Traviata." Subsequent productions in the repertory include "The Marriage of Figaro," "The Rape of Lucretia" and "Tandem."

The significance to the cultural climate of Los Angeles of the completed complex of The Music Center is obvious. What is not obvious and what may be even more far reaching in effect is the significance to the American theater.

For 300 years, the theater in this country has been the great stonewall of the arts, given the lowest position on the cultural totem, disregarded, debased and dismissed.

Only in this country has the drama been the province of the quick-buck promoter, the callous entrepreneur and the denizens of "show biz," which Tennessee Williams once likened to the practice of religion being placed in the control of a herd of water buffaloes.

Only in the last decade has there been any concentrated effort to develop institutional theater in the traditional cultural perspective to reflect, enhance and illuminate American life. Why after 300 years this movement has suddenly caught fire across the land and is reflected in governmental and civic concern is fodder for future sociologists. Certainly the dedication to drama of the new Mark Taper Forum and Ahmanson here and the formation of the Center Theatre Group to produce significant plays is a major step in the movement.

It is strangely coincidental that both the plays opening the new theaters this week would be experimental in form, rooted in fact and sharing, within a handful of years, the common era of the turbulent early 17th century in western Europe, a period in the wake of Martin Luther that was one of great social upheaval and moral re-examination, in which established institutions were taking stock of themselves, much as they are today.

"Man of La Mancha" is hardly the usual fare of the Civic Light Opera, which built its immense success on

frothy Graustarkian operettas and lighthearted musicals. This is sturdy stuff, an exploration of the unquenchable spirit of man in the dark days of the Spanish Inquisition. Dale Wasserman wrought his drama from the life of the great Miguel de Cervantes y Saavedra as revealed in his immortal "Don Quixote."

Albert Marre has staged the musical drama as if the audience were the derelicts in a hellhole of a Spanish prison into which the aging Cervantes is tossed. It is a curtainless drama, played without intermission, during which, to save his neck from the raging brigands, cutthroats and bawds surrounding him, he enchants them with the tale of the eternal quest of Quixote.

Marre has brought three key performers from the tremendously successful New York production of the play to appear here—Richard Kiley, who plays Cervantes; Joan Diener, the grubby Aldonza; and Ray Middleton, the Inkeeper. Harvey Lowmyer, who plays the Sancho Panza of this production, which Marre is restaging specifically for the spacious Ahmanson.

Cervantes died in 1616, the year after Urban Grandier was ordained a Jesuit novice in the France of Louis XIII. And it is Father Grandier, the handsome, eloquent, erudite, licentious pastor of Loudun, who is the central figure of "The Devils."

The play, which Whiting wrought from Aldous Huxley's famous study, "The Devils of Loudun," caused a mild flurry of disapproval here when it was first announced because it portrays a libertine priest accused of being a devil by a neurotic nun who never met him. That Grandier was openly and boldly unrepentant, even marrying and fathering a child, is history, but he was deorbited, imprisoned, tortured and burned to death was caused neither by his broken vows nor the false charges

lodged against him but because there were those in power who envied, feared and hated him seems equally historically accurate.

Director Gordon Davidson believes "The Devils" is a deeply Christian play, dealing with the temptation, the fall and the redemption of man. Certainly it is one of the most powerful and important plays in contemporary drama.

The cast includes some of the finest professionals in the current theater, notably Frank Langella as Father Grandier and Joyce Ebert as Sister Jeanne of the Angels, his accuser. Among the others are Robert Casper, Iggie Wolfington, William Hickey, Mark Lennard, Sid Conrad, Anthony Zerbe, Ian Wolfe, Jonathan Kidd, Ed Flanders, Laurie Mock and Nancy Jeris.

"The Devils" will be followed into the theater by Roluumus Linney's new play on Frederick the Great, "The Sorrows of Frederick"; Friedrich Durrenmat's sardonic comedy, "The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi"; and a new play by William Murray commissioned by the CTG, "Witnesses."

"Man of La Mancha" will be in the Ahmanson for most of the summer, followed by the first CTG season in the big theater. Only one play has been definitely selected for next fall—the American premiere of O'Neill's "More Stately Mansions," to be staged by Joe Quire, Jr.

His plans are lofty—Elliot Martin promises a season of plays with major stars staged by the world's most eminent directors. The concentration will be on new works but there is a mandate here to serve the community both with classical productions and works of intrinsic value, whether new or old.

What we have at this moment are the shining newness of buildings, the untrudged stages, empty seats and virgin walls—and infinite promise...

## MUSIC CENTER DEDICATION WEEK

MARK TAPER FORUM—Dedication ceremonies and opening of the Center Theatre Group production of "The Devils" tonight; subscription season opens Friday.

AHMANSION THEATER—Dedication ceremonies Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday; opening of the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera season with the production of "Man of La Mancha" Wednesday.

DOROTHY CHANDLER PAVILION—Special concert by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra with Zubin Mehta conducting, Leonard Pennario soloist, at 3 p.m. today. Opening of the Metropolitan Opera National Company with "La Traviata" Monday night, continuing through April 22.

Additional stories and photographs on The Music Center are in today's West magazine.