A-R's $960-thousand dream becomes a reality

By Jeanne Schemmel

It took a few more years, numerous plans, and a considerable amount more money to build than originally anticipated, but Anoka-Ramsey Community College finally has its new $960-thousand theatre building. The new two-story brick structure is smaller than was hoped for in its early planning, but is nonetheless an impressive, useful building.

Planning for the new theatre facilities began in 1969 with a committee of faculty and administrators working on Phase III of the over-all master campus construction plan. Originally, the theatre building was to be constructed in conjunction with the Fine Arts department, combining the two facilities into one building. Faculty representatives from the departments involved researched and drew up plans on their respective areas; the plans were then presented to the college's president.

Speech instructor Ann Sidoti conducted research with several community theatres. Using these guides, she worked on formulating specifications for what was then hoped to be the "ideal theatre" building.

The initial building plans called for a large stage and auditorium, classrooms, workrooms, storage rooms and a smaller rehearsal area, soundproofed well enough to afford a full-scale rehearsal to be occurring while a play would be performed on the main stage.

When the plan was submitted, it was apparent the construction of such a combined facility was too costly - well in excess of the state legislature's appropriation - and alternate plans must be developed. Construction of the Fine Arts building was undertaken, and the theatre was off on its own.

Revised plans were drawn up and submitted for bids; construction costs had risen during this time, and costs for these plans were still prohibitive. Finally, a much smaller and less equipped building was proposed, accepted, and construction began on it in 1975.

Even though it is somewhat smaller than hoped for, the theatre facility is

impressive and comparable to that of other area colleges. And it cost nearly a million dollars to build.

The theatre's main house comfortably seats 338 patrons. Its spacious aisles are designed to facilitate attendance by the handicapped, and the entire back balcony is designed especially for wheelchair seating.

Seating in the house is continental style. This means that rather than having a middle aisle, there are aisles along the sides. Jack Bibee of the theatre department explained that this style means the preferred view afforded by center seating isn't lost by the aisle location. The wide, spacious rows also allow easy access to all seats, as well as ample leg room for everyone.

Carpeting throughout the building is burlap in color and texture. The walls are painted taupe, an off-white shade. The spacious lobby is brightly painted and a stairway on the east side of the lobby leads to an art gallery, where exhibitions by local artists will hang during the productions.

The stage is 40 feet wide and 32 feet deep, with fly space about 40 feet high. Ten pieces of scenery can be flown" (lowered when needed and then raised out of sight when not needed) during a production.

The orchestra pit, in front of the stage, is 36 feet by 6 feet, and 8 feet 7 inches deep. A trap room under the stage opens into the pit, allowing easy movement of large musical instruments. When the orchestra pit isn't needed, a sectional plywood cover will be used, extending the thrust of the stage an additional ten feet.

The building also boasts a green room, makeup room, dressing room, costume shop, scene shop, and storage rooms.

An area not readily noticed by the average theatre goer is the technical equipment. It's all quality equipment," said Bibee. "We really lucked out on equipment."

For instance, there are two lighting positions above the audience to light from. This, he explained, is because separate lighting would be necessary when the pit cover is on, extending the thrust of the stage.

An added feature of the new theatre's lighting system is its control area. In theatrical and other major productions, all lighting is controlled from the rear control booth. For smaller-scale uses, there are

house and stage dimmer controls located backstage, allowing easy operation of necessary lighting without a prior knowledge of theater lighting. This type of lighting would be used for some band concerts and lectures, where full lighting isn't needed.

Also controlled from the back booth are the theatre's sound system and any projectors that would be needed. Recessed areas in the side walls in front of the stage will hold additional side lighting when needed in productions. This lighting is also run from the control booth.

Sound is another matter. There are several speaker outlets throughout the theatre, but no sound equipment was included in the final building plan. The department does have some equipment, but additional needed equipment will come in under future expansion plans.

Along with the sound comes acoustics. Still to be tested are the acoustics," said Bibee."They're not as bad, at this point, as we thought. Really, it's a wonderful place for speaking. But, as is the usual problem, when it's good for speaking it's poor for music. It's just too live." The real test of the acoustics will come during the first productions of **"Hello, Dolly!"**

While the Anoka and Coon Rapids community theatres are working with the college on its productions, they may be producing their own plays on the A-R stage in the future. Other intended uses for the theatre include music department concerts and recitals, guest artist appearances, theatre classes, and large class assemblies.