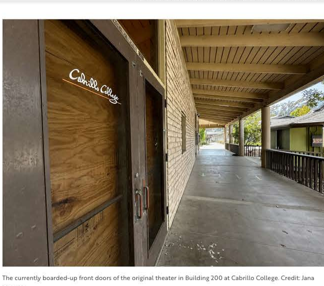

The currently boarded-up front doors of the original theater in Building 200 at Cabrillo College. Credit: Jana Marcus

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

470 empty seats: What happens to Cabrillo College's original theater now?

BY JANA MARCUS August 30, 2026

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Quick Take

For nearly half a century, Cabrillo College's original theater hosted world-renowned musicians, Hollywood actors and generations of young artists. It has been dark since 2009. Now, amid a shortage of performance spaces in Santa Cruz County, some are asking whether its 470 empty seats could have a future.

For 17 years, the doors have been locked.

Walk past Cabrillo College's Building 200 today, in the center of the Aptos campus, and there is little to suggest what lies inside.

Behind those doors is a 470-seat theater, dark and silent since 2009, when Cabrillo opened its gleaming new Visual and Performing Arts Complex across the street.

The stage is still there. So are the dressing rooms, backstage corridors and rows of seats where generations of Santa Cruz County audiences once settled in to see some of the most celebrated artists of their time.

But the audiences are gone.

For anyone who arrived in Santa Cruz County during the past decade or two, the original Cabrillo Theater may mean nothing at all.

For those who remember it, that is almost impossible to imagine.

Because long before Santa Cruz County had the performing arts venues it has today, this was the place.

The Cabrillo Theater was where you came to hear a symphony orchestra, see a Broadway musical, watch a Hollywood actor walk onto a local stage or take your first performing arts class.

For nearly half a century, an extraordinary amount of Santa Cruz County's cultural life happened inside this building.

And now it sits empty.

Before there was a theater

When Cabrillo College opened in 1959, there wasn't yet an Aptos campus, much less a theater. Early drama productions were presented at Watsonville's E.A. Hall School while the new college took shape.

That changed in the fall of 1962.

The second Cabrillo Music Festival with conductor Gerhard Samuel in the original theater, 1964. Credit: Cabrillo College Archives

The newly constructed 35,000-square-foot Speech Arts-Music Building included what was originally called the Little Theatre. Cabrillo's first drama instructor, Dolores Abrams, was proud of an important distinction: This wasn't an auditorium with a stage stuck at one end. It had been built as a state-of-the-art theater for the time.

It also looked very much like 1962.

Avocado-green carpet ran down the aisles between cushioned seats. Natural redwood covered the walls and ceiling. A gold curtain hung across the stage.

Behind it was an entire theatrical world.

There were six dressing rooms, bathrooms with showers, a large makeup area, a green room with a kitchenette and a scene shop where sets could be built and moved directly onto the stage. Upstairs, an enclosed glass booth housed the lighting, sound and projection equipment.

Actors from Cabrillo Stage's 2002 production of "Some Like It Hot" get ready in the original theater's makeup area. Credit: Jana Marcus

Drama instructor Sara Albertson gives a workshop in the green room of the original theater, 2007. Credit: Jana Marcus

Performances could be piped into the backstage areas. Downstairs was a cavernous storage area and later a classroom that generations of theater students would come to know simply as "The Dungeon."

Building sets for "Jesus Christ Superstar" in the scene shop off of the stage, 2008. Credit: Jana Marcus

Preparing for a publicity photo shoot in the "dungeon," below the theater, 2008. Credit: Lyndsey Gould

The rest of the building housed music classrooms and faculty offices, a music library, piano practice rooms, a costume shop and a ticket office.

Jazz band instructor Lile O. Cruse teaching in the music instrumental room at Cabrillo College, 1981. Credit: Cabrillo College Archives

For 1962, it was a pretty remarkable place.

The first production mounted there was Eugene O'Neill's "Ah, Wilderness!"

The Little Theatre wasn't going to stay little for long.

When the world came to Aptos

In August 1963, roughly 300 people gathered in the year-old theater for the inaugural performance of an experiment called the Cabrillo Music Festival.

Born from concerts at Aptos' Sticky Wicket coffeehouse and the efforts of musician Robert Hughes, Cabrillo choral director Ted Toews and famed composer Lou Harrison, the festival found a home in Cabrillo's new theater.

It wasn't long before some remarkable artists were coming through Aptos.

When conductor Dennis Russell Davies took the helm as music director in 1974, the festival entered a remarkable period of adventurous programming that helped establish its national reputation.

Aaron Copland conducted his own work on that stage in 1978. Virgil Thomson and Laurie Anderson performed there. Dave Brubeck was artist-in-residence in 1980. Cellist János Starker, John Cage and Keith Jarrett were among the many artists who came through the theater.

Eventually, the audiences became too large. The festival presented its final season on the Cabrillo campus in 1985 before moving to a larger venue.

The Cabrillo Music Festival conducted by Dennis Russell Davies, who brought the festival to national recognition, 1980. Credit: Jana Marcus

But music was only part of what happened in that theater.

"The first show I created there, in 1970, was the Stravinsky Festival, a dance concert with the Santa Cruz Symphony," remembers Wilma Marcus Chandler, who later chaired Cabrillo's Theatre Arts department for nearly 30 years.

She immediately saw the possibilities.

"That building embraced what Cabrillo was all about for me," Chandler says. "It brought together the community, the arts, the students and the faculty. It was a beautiful combination."

By the mid-1970s, Cabrillo College Extension had developed an ambitious summer repertory theater program, producing four shows in a single summer. Hollywood actors regularly came to Aptos to perform.

Vivian Vance, forever Ethel Mertz to generations of "I Love Lucy" fans, starred in "Everybody Loves Opal" in 1974 and returned two years later. Sylvia Sidney came through. Jesse White, television's famous Maytag repairman, appeared in "Never Too Late."

In 1977, "Ellery Queen" star Jim Hutton came to Cabrillo to star in "Harvey," bringing his teenage son, Timothy, who had a small walk-on role.

Three years later, Timothy Hutton won an Academy Award for "Ordinary People."

The following summer brought Hollywood legend John Carradine in "The Man Who Came to Dinner." His famous sons, Keith and David, came around, too.

It was an unusual amount of artistic life passing through one small community college theater.

But the famous names tell only part of the story.

A place to make something

Ask the people who worked there what mattered most, and they rarely start with the famous names.

They talk about making things.

Taking chances. Teaching. Learning. Becoming artists.

Choreographer Tandy Beal began teaching and performing at Cabrillo in 1972 and remembers the low, wide stage as almost "Cinemascope-esque."

"Everything started in that theater," she says.

Work Beal created and premiered at Cabrillo later traveled across the United States, Europe and Japan, including on a U.S. State Department tour through Eastern and Central Europe. In the early 1980s, she began creating work there with Bobby McFerrin, before most of the world knew his name.

"I have a lot of fondness for that space," Beal says. She remembers spending hours in the theater during rehearsals and technical work, "in rapture about creating and laughing with the people I worked with."

Tandy Beal (right) and Bobby McFerrin performing in the original theater, circa 1980s. Credit: Tandy Beal Archives

Its informality mattered, too. The original theater sat in the middle of campus, surrounded by classrooms and daily college life. "It was a true central hub, not only of the college, but of the community," Beal says. "There was an informal and friendly atmosphere about the old theater."

That quality, she believes, helped make it a gathering place rather than simply a room where performances happened.

For Chandler, its importance was inseparable from teaching.

She watched frightened young actors gain confidence there. They learned how to project to the back row, how to command a stage and, as she puts it, "how to walk onto a stage bravely."

"I saw students blossom," she says. "It makes me emotional because that is what teachers are supposed to do. And that's what the theater was there for, for us to do our best. A teacher can't ask for more than that."

Current Cabrillo Theatre Arts chair and scenic designer Skip Epperson remembers the theater as a place where the rules could be bent.

"The old theater was fantastic because we could do what we wanted to in the space," he says.

If a production needed to extend the stage into the audience, they did it. If performers needed to enter from an unconventional direction, they found a way.

For Chandler's memorable 1997 production of "Rashomon," Epperson transformed the space into a traditional Japanese Noh theater design with a hanamichi walkway stretching directly through the audience. The Watsonville Taiko troupe played onstage, while costume designer Maria Crush helped create the magical world around them.

"It gave Santa Cruz audiences and students a taste of something they may have never experienced before," Chandler remembers.

Wilma Marcus Chandler's 1997 production of "Rashomon," with hanamachi walkway leading to the stage in the traditional Japanese style. Set design by Skip Epperson. Credit: Jana Marcus

The limitations of the room became part of its possibilities.

"It was a very versatile space," Epperson says. "That's what I loved about it."

The passage of Proposition 13 in 1978 dramatically changed public funding in California, and arts and education programs felt the consequences.

The freewheeling years when Cabrillo could mount a sprawling summer theater season with multiple productions and professional guest stars became increasingly difficult to sustain.

In response, Cabrillo music instructor Lile O. Cruse created Cabrillo Stage in 1981, establishing a summer musical theater program that carried the tradition forward in a different form, drawing from the deep pool of performers, musicians and theater artists throughout the Bay Area.

Cabrillo Stage 2007 production of "Kiss Me Kate" opening curtain with orchestra in front of the stage. Set design by Skip Epperson. Credit: Jana Marcus

Cabrillo Stage soon became a summer institution of its own and continues today.

But it no longer performs in the theater where it began.

The last curtain call

By the late 2000s, Cabrillo was preparing for a new era.

Across the street from the original theater, the college's new Visual and Performing Arts Complex was nearing completion, a major investment in the future of music, theater, dance and visual arts at Cabrillo.

Cabrillo Stage's wildly popular "The Wizard of Oz" became the original theater's final production in the summer of 2009.

Cabrillo Stage's "Wizard of Oz" was the final production in the original theater in the summer of 2009. Directed by Trevor Little. Set design by Skip Epperson. Credit: Jana Marcus

Then the attention shifted across the street.

The new Crocker Theater offered something the old room never had: a fly system and modern theatrical technology.

"We pulled out every bell and whistle for the first production in the new theater," Epperson remembers. "We were showing off."

On Oct. 9, 2009, Cabrillo celebrated the new complex with a grand opening production combining music, theater and dance. Chandler came out of retirement to direct it.

Chandler and others never imagined it would also mean the end of the original theater.

"I never thought the old theater would go silently into dust," she says. "I thought we would have two theaters and be a cultural center for the entire Bay Area."

Instead, the original theater went dark.

Today, the hallways of the Crocker Theater are lined with posters chronicling more than half a century of Cabrillo performances, many of them from productions that took place in the original theater.

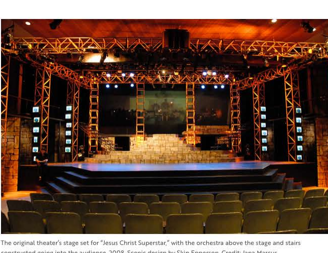
"It's not just a walk down memory lane," Epperson says. "It's a testimony to what we have done at Cabrillo."

To Epperson, those posters are also a reminder of a period when Cabrillo was a leader in the arts and an extraordinary amount of work was created on that stage.

Seventeen years later, what now?

Almost two decades after the last audience filed out, the question isn't only what happened inside the original Cabrillo Theater.

It's what could happen there again.


The original theater's stage set for "Jesus Christ Superstar," with the orchestra above the stage and stairs constructed going into the audience, 2008. Scenic design by Skip Epperson. Credit: Jana Marcus

Santa Cruz County has no shortage of musicians, dancers and theater companies. Local producers describe a different problem: finding affordable, properly equipped places in which to perform.

And sitting in the middle of Cabrillo College is a dark, 470-seat theater.

No one should pretend reopening it would be as simple as sweeping the stage and turning on the lights.

Cabrillo officials say Building 200 remains a "valued part of the campus," but returning the aging facility to occupancy would require significant capital investment.

"Unfortunately, the college does not have funding available to renovate the building for occupancy at this time," says Cabrillo Marketing Director Regina Ip.

Ip says the college is in the "beginning stages of exploring partnership opportunities to revitalize this space."

What "revitalize" means remains unclear. Asked whether that might include restoring the theater, Cabrillo did not elaborate.

The idea of returning the original theater to community use isn't new. In fact, variations of it have surfaced repeatedly almost from the moment the doors closed.

Beal proposed turning the theater into a community performance venue not long after it closed. Epperson says he also approached college administrators about restoring it for community use. They were both told no.

"It broke my heart," Epperson says of watching the theater remain closed. "Broke it."

Emeritus choral director Cheryl Anderson remembers advocating for the space as well. She still sees the original theater as a potential community venue, particularly if it could be rented at a reasonable cost.

"It would be a viable place for the community," Anderson says.

Chandler and Anderson both remember what it meant for students and the public to have visiting performers from around the world come to campus, something Anderson says has become increasingly difficult because of scheduling and rental costs at the new complex.

"There are not enough reminders these days that the arts are strong at Cabrillo," says Anderson, who would like to see those kinds of performances return to campus "so that students could access them."

And outside Cabrillo, current theater producers describe a similar need.

"There are no midsize theaters in town that are actually working theaters," says Santa Cruz Shakespeare Artistic Director Charles Pasternak. "The need is great."

There are places where performances happen. But a working theater is something different.

It has dressing rooms. Wings. Backstage space. Technical infrastructure. Somewhere for actors to wait for an entrance and somewhere to store the equipment necessary to put on a show.

Renegade Theatre Company president and producer Q Herbranson discovered the difference while producing "Matilda" at the Rio Theatre in Santa Cruz. With no backstage, actors waited outside in the alley for their entrances.

At the Veterans Memorial Building in downtown Santa Cruz, Renegade essentially creates a theater inside a multipurpose room each time it produces a show.

And affordability may be an even larger problem.

Herbranson says venue costs can consume a quarter to a third of a production's budget.

"The arts really have to be subsidized at some level if you can't charge your patrons enough to cover your costs," she says. "Otherwise you wind up pricing out your audience."

But not so fast.

The hard questions

SH Theatricals founder Simon Hayward agrees that Santa Cruz needs more real theater space, but says he would be nervous about moving one of his productions into a theater that large.

Herbranson feels the same way.

"Right now that scares me," she says. "Can I sell the tickets?"

Then there is the building itself. Cabrillo says substantial investment would be required before Building 200 could again be occupied safely, and there is no current public estimate of what restoring the theater would cost. Someone would have to operate it. Maintain it. Staff it. Schedule it.

A theater has to work financially as well as artistically.

Missing the old Cabrillo Theater isn't enough reason to bring it back.

The real question is whether it could fill a genuine need in Santa Cruz County today.

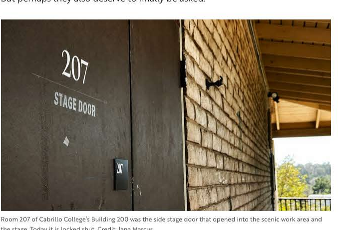
What would it actually cost to bring it back? Would local theater, dance and music organizations use it and can they afford it?

Could Cabrillo partner with an outside nonprofit to operate it? Could philanthropy help with the initial restoration? Could it become a community arts venue while also creating opportunities for Cabrillo students?

Or has its time passed?

Those questions deserve answers before anyone talks about launching a campaign to save the theater.

But perhaps they also deserve to finally be asked.



Room 207 of Cabrillo College's Building 200 was the side stage door that opened into the scenic work area and the stage. Today it is locked shut. Credit: Jana Marcus

What do you think?

Epperson calls the original Cabrillo Theater a "community treasure." And before deciding what becomes of a place with this much history, he believes it is important to understand "who the ghosts are who live in that space."

Beal describes that feeling in a different way.

"I believe there is a morphic resonance in a place when you create something," Beal says.

Epperson feels it, too.

"I can still hear the music in the space," he says.

But memories, however powerful, can't determine the future of a college building.

The next voices in this conversation should belong to the community.

Maybe you saw your first musical there. Maybe you performed on that stage, played in the orchestra, built scenery, took a class or sat in those seats waiting for the lights to go down.

Maybe you've never stepped through its doors.

Either way, the question is the same:

What should happen to the original Cabrillo Theater?

For 17 years, 470 seats have been sitting behind locked doors.

Maybe before we decide what becomes of them, we should find out how many people are waiting for those doors to open again.

We'd like to hear from you. Take our short community survey.

Survey at: www.janamarcus.com/survey

Or send us an email at: cabrillotheaterOG@gmail.com