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The Smith Center

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Written by Richard Davis

“Fanfare for the Common Man,” the 20th century American masterwork by gay composer Aaron Copland was selected by The Smith Center for the Performing Arts as the “muse” to inspire Las Vegas artist Tim Bavington’s large synthetic polymer painting that will dominate the second floor of The Smith Center’s own masterwork, the 2,050 seat Reynolds Hall. The theme and the use of a local artist capture The Smith Center’s vision of itself “as the new cultural heart of our community,” said Richard Johnson, vice president and CFO of The Smith Center. States Johnson, “We’re building a world-class performing arts center for the people who live and work here in Las Vegas.”

“The Smith Center was built by the community, for the community,” proclaims Amber Stidham, public relations manager for The Smith Center. The LGBT community is central to The Smith Center’s vision of community. Richard Johnson represents The Smith Center as a non-profit member of the QVegas Business Alliance. In addition, prominent LGBT community leaders serve on The Smith Center’s Board of Directors, including Charles Atwood, Robert Forbuss, Sig Rogich and Roger Thomas. The diversity of The Smith Center’s board is key to their vision of the arts in Southern Nevada.

Forged from a community “call to action” in the early 90’s by leading gaming and business leaders, including Steve and Elaine Wynn, Don Snyder, (then president of Boyd Gaming, who now serves as chair of The Smith Center’s board) and John Goolsby, (then-president of the Howard Hughes Corporation), the gleaming stainless steel tower of The Smith Center has risen through the strong support of the Las Vegas community. That support showed itself when the Las Vegas-based Donald W. Reynolds Foundation gave a landmark gift of \$50 million in 2005 in honor of Fred W. Smith and his

wife, Mary. The various lily-inspired design elements found throughout the Center are a delicate nod to Mary Smith's love for lilies. Smith is the chair of the Reynolds Foundation and the retired chair of the Donrey Media Group, the late Donald Reynolds' media empire, and the former publisher of the Las Vegas Review-Journal. The Reynolds Foundation followed up its initial gift with an additional \$100 million, making its total gift the largest philanthropic donation in Nevada history and the second largest donation to the performing arts in the United States.

"The people of Las Vegas made it happen," Charles Atwood said in a recent interview with QVegas about The Smith Center's anticipated opening in March 2012. Atwood, who serves on its Executive Committee, is being honored as Man of the Year 2011 at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center of Southern Nevada's Honorary in November. The total \$470 million cost for The Smith Center has already been paid for through a creative combination of public and private funding. Among the private businesses and citizens who have contributed are the 54 Founders who each gave \$1 million toward The Smith Center's capital campaign. The LGBT community's Atwood is among those Founders whose names will be permanently displayed in the pink Verona marble in the Grand Lobby of Reynolds Hall.

The Smith Center was designed by David M. Schwarz Architects and executed by HKS Architects. The design reflects the 1930's Art Deco details of the Hoover Dam, capturing in 2,458 tons of Indiana limestone and 4,000 tons of structural steel the mood of that first great public works project that defined Las Vegas to the world. It too, was built in the midst of a national depression. Though monumental, The Smith Center, (like Hoover Dam), possesses a delicate grace, culminating in a 16-story bell tower that houses a four-octave carillon, comprised of 47 handcrafted bronze bells, making The Smith Center itself a musical instrument. The tower is topped by a stainless steel crown reflecting Nevada's official nickname, "The Silver State."

The project's five acre campus houses three performing arts buildings, along with the Discovery Children's Museum, surrounded by the 1.7 acre Symphony Park. Reynolds Hall, with its dramatic stage and full orchestra pit capable of seating up to 100 musicians is an architectural masterpiece with stunning balconies that sweep the eye upwards to a domed ceiling of shimmering light. The Grand Lobby boasts custom-designed terrazzo floors with walls lined by Verona marble. The grand staircase's stainless steel Art Deco railing lifts one's gaze up and into the hall. Custom-designed cone chandeliers descend dramatically from the ceiling and resemble the turbines at the Hoover Dam. The sculpture in the Grand Lobby by Benjamin Victor is drawn from the occult-like "Winged Figures of the Republic", created by Oskar J.W. Hansen for the Hoover Dam Memorial.

The Boman Pavilion, Reynolds Hall's cozy sister theater, seats 258 cocktail-style and will feature cabaret and jazz performances. The Boman was named in honor of Jeane Boman, the mother of Dr. Keith Boman, vice chair of The Smith Center's board and a Reynolds Foundation trustee. Bay window balconies grace the Boman's second floor and overlook Symphony Park. Modern Western artist Ed Mell has been commissioned to paint four paintings in homage to the desert southwest for the Pavilion's lobby. The top floors of the Pavilion will house a business center to provide support to community arts organizations. The final building in The Smith Center complex will be a 250-seat studio theater. The studio theater's stage will have a sprung floor for theater or dance,

ideal as a rehearsal space and for black box and children's theater, community and private events.

As beautiful as The Smith Center is, the practical functioning of a performing arts center came first in the design process. The acoustical design company, Akustiks, led by Paul Scarbrough, oversaw the design of everything from flooring to lighting sconces that contributed to the acoustical structure of The Smith Center spaces. The Smith Center's design includes a sub-basement of concrete 36 inches thick to absorb sounds from the nearby Union Pacific tracks. The Smith Center's roof contains a 12-inch thick slab of concrete with an air gap, and then is layered with another 10 inches of interior sound deadening materials to absorb the noises of downtown Las Vegas. In addition, The Smith Center will be the first performing arts center of its size and scope to be LEED certified for environmental sustainability.

"We will be bringing something for everyone," CFO Richard Johnson said, "Broadway, classical music, dance, jazz-cabaret, and all kinds of music." Amber Stidham, PR manager said, "Our price points start at \$24 per ticket to make our programming affordable for the local community." Says Johnson, "Strong ticket sales are already demonstrating that there is great demand in Las Vegas for the performances that will soon appear on our stages." The Smith Center's inaugural season includes four Broadway blockbusters: "The Color Purple," "Mary Poppins," "Million Dollar Quartet," and "Memphis," which won the 2010 Tony award for Best Musical. Even in its selection of touring shows The Smith Center's focus is on the local community. "Million Dollar Quartet" is perhaps a nod at Las Vegas' unique obsession with Elvis. Season subscribers to the "Broadway Las Vegas Series" lock in their seats for 2012's production of "Wicked". The Smith Center's other offerings in music, dance and stage—from Yo-Yo Ma and "Sweet Honey in the Rock" to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and "Golda's Balcony"—reflects The Smith's Center's commitment to diversity. Special attractions include appearances by gay and lesbian humorists David Sedaris and Lily Tomlin. For the in Boman Pavilion's Cabaret Jazz series comes local favorite Clint Holmes, along with such renowned artists as Branford Marsalis, Andrea Marcovicci and LGBT favorite Barbara Cook.

For tickets to the Broadway Las Vegas series or any other upcoming event at The Smith Center, log on to www.TheSmithCenter.com or call the box office at 702-982-7805 (temporarily housed at the Holsum Lofts at 241 West Charleston Blvd.). With their "Design Your Own" series, you can choose from 20 shows and save up to 15 percent off each ticket.

Further anchoring The Smith Center within the local performing arts community, The Smith Center's Richard Johnson confirms, "The Smith Center will provide a new home for our resident companies the Las Vegas Philharmonic and the Nevada Ballet Theatre." Las Vegas Philharmonic president and CEO Jeri Crawford, who along with husband Richard, own the familiar Green Valley Grocery chain as well as Crawford Oil, states, "The Smith Center experience will be an evening of fully experiencing the arts, from the excitement of entering the new performing arts center to the quality of the sound and staging." Patricia Pieper Fink, marketing director for the Philharmonic says, "Because we are splitting our season between Artemus Ham Hall at UNLV and The

Smith Center, we are offering a mini-series for new subscribers who want to experience the Philharmonic at The Smith Center.”

For the Philharmonic’s inaugural concert in May 1999, under the baton of founding music director and conductor laureate Hal Weller, the Philharmonic performed Mahler’s “Resurrection” Symphony No. 2. Now, thirteen years later under the baton of Maestro David Itkin, the Philharmonic will reprise Mahler’s astounding masterwork for their Smith Center debut on March 24th, 2012, with 250 performers on stage, including two choirs. Jeri Crawford said being a resident company at The Smith Center will give the Philharmonic a “national stage while deepening its community connections and broadening its audience base.” States Crawford “The Philharmonic sometimes felt isolated from the community in their current home at Ham Hall on the UNLV campus. We’re like the best kept secret in Las Vegas.” Crawford said that at The Smith Center the Philharmonic will become better “integrated into Las Vegas culture. We will become part of the fabric of the community.” In the future, Crawford would like to see the development of a Philharmonic chamber music series in the Boman Pavilion and she would also like to see the Philharmonic perform concerts inspired by Hispanic and Asian music. “To say thank you, the Philharmonic plans a “Hard Hat” concert for The Smith Center’s construction workers before the official opening on March 10, 2012”, said the Philharmonic’s Patricia Fink.

James Canfield, artistic director for the Nevada Ballet Theatre (NBT), said in an interview about the upcoming NBT season, “NBT stepping foot on that stage is a highlight of giant proportion.” NBT will be celebrating their 40th anniversary with a gala concert and their official debut at The Smith Center on May 5th, 2012. Canfield said, “Our gala will acknowledge a monumental moment in our history that honors the individuals who have supported and brought dance to the City of Las Vegas for forty years and have gifted all of us with our new home, The Smith Center for the Performing Arts.” The Las Vegas Philharmonic’s Patricia Fink said that the Philharmonic is in negotiation with NBT to provide live music for the gala performance. NBT also looks forward to continuing their popular “Studio Series” in The Smith Center’s more intimate studio theater space where audiences will be able to experience NBT dancers up close and personal in works choreographed by the dancers themselves.

Other Las Vegas arts organizations look forward to possible collaborations at The Smith Center. Opera Las Vegas’ artistic director Gloria Allen, said, “We would love to collaborate on a production with the Philharmonic at The Smith Center.” She said that Opera Las Vegas’ recent sold-out production of “Tosca,” staged at the Nicholas Horn Theater on the Cheyenne campus at College of Southern Nevada, caught the eye of the local performing arts community. The production was conducted by acclaimed Metropolitan Opera Maestro Gregory Buchalter with full orchestra and Met stars Elizabeth Blancke-Biggs, Raúl Melo and Daniel Sutin in the leads. The excellent opera and children’s choruses featured talented local singers, and local artists were also featured in supporting roles. Allen hopes to stage Opera Las Vegas’ spring production of “Don Giovanni” at The Smith Center.

In a past interview with QVegas, Bernard Gaddis, artistic director of the Las Vegas Contemporary Dance Theatre (LVCDT), spoke about looking forward to 2014, when LVCDT will host the International Association of Blacks in Dance Conference at The

Smith Center. Gaddis said, "I believe in a holistic approach to the arts and the whole Las Vegas arts community will be involved in the conference." Besides exciting performances from world class companies, the conference will bring master classes and lectures on dance to the community. The Smith Center's Richard Johnson said, "The Smith Center is busily scheduling local arts events and exploring ways to work with local arts organizations in our facilities. We hope that the focus on the arts with The Smith Center's opening will raise awareness about the many arts organizations active in our community."

There is some tension in this difficult economy between the vision of The Smith Center as the heart of the local arts community in Las Vegas, and the struggle that The Smith Center's resident companies experience in raising funds. The Philharmonic's Jeri Crawford says ruefully, "Long-time donors will call me and say, 'Oh, I just made a contribution to The Smith Center.' But not one dime of that goes to the Philharmonic." Patricia Pieper Fink, marketing director for the Philharmonic, said that the community needs to continue their support of the resident arts organizations if The Smith Center is to realize its vision. Local Pulitzer-nominated playwright, Edward D Padilla agrees. "There are no community theaters in Las Vegas that have full fly space. If The Smith Center opens its doors to local groups for rental or subsidizes local productions, great." Padilla, nominated for a Pulitzer for his AIDS drama, "Fallen Guardian Angels," said, "A full season of local big budget musicals would really fill a void. But if The Smith Center is just a business or a money making enterprise, it will slowly lose speed." That the Philharmonic's own annual fundraising event, the "Diamonds are Forever" Gala, is honoring the chair of The Smith Center's board, Donald Snyder, and his wife, Dee, shows that while The Smith Center may siphon off some support for local arts organizations, the excitement of The Smith Center is also generating new interest and funding support for those same organizations.

The Smith Center's president and CEO, Myron Martin (formerly with the Liberace Museum) credits his passion for the performing arts to a fourth grade field trip. Martin's own daughter, Molly, will be in the fourth grade when The Smith Center opens in March. Martin says educational programming is the driving force behind why The Smith Center was created. Amber Stidham confirms that The Smith Center has joined with the Clark County School District to partner with the John F. Kennedy Center Partners in Education Program and the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts in Virginia to train teachers to incorporate music, theater and dance into their curriculums. The Boman Pavilion at The Smith Center will be home to The Elaine Wynn Studio for Arts Education, thanks to a \$5 million gift from Wynn. The Las Vegas Philharmonic's Patricia Pieper Fink sees the educational role of the arts as essential to developing future audiences since, states Fink, "Our average audience member's age is 55." Fink said that the Philharmonic is committed to youth concerts in the schools in order to expand and diversify their audience base. Likewise, Gloria Allen with Opera Las Vegas is passionate about bringing opera into the schools with Opera Las Vegas' "Watch Out, or the Music Will Get You!" children's opera presentation. The Philharmonic's Fink said, "We have to keep the classics alive through strong consistent educational programs." The Smith Center's Johnson adds, "Our goal is to continue to expand our wonderful education programs."

Johnson summarizes, "Our ability to raise the funds needed for a project of this magnitude in the midst of incredible economic challenges clearly shows our community's support for The Smith Center." This summer The Smith Center launched its Annual Fund Campaign for programming, arts education and community outreach. In the fall they'll be beginning the Capstone campaign to raise funds to secure The Smith Center's financial future. Said The Smith Center's Charles Atwood, "The wonderful thing about people in Las Vegas is that we have this attitude that we can do anything." Gifts of all sizes are welcome and make this fundraising campaign a community-wide effort. To donate go to www.TheSmithCenter.com.

Upcoming local performing arts community events include Top Hat Tenor Trio, a cocktail fundraiser for the spring Opera Las Vegas production of "Don Giovanni, Trio is being presented at the home of Phil Varecchio in Anthem on Friday, November 4. Tickets are \$40-45. For more information call Alvida Lane at 702-459-6353.

The Las Vegas Contemporary Dance Theatre launches its fifth season with their Fall Concert Series 2011 at the West Las Vegas Library on November 4, 5 and 6, featuring "Vespers" by the legendary choreographic master Ulysses Dove. The Fall Concert Series will also see the return of "Brethren," along with Las Vegas favorite, "Mood Indigo." Tickets are available at www.lvcontemporarydancetheater.org.

The second in the Las Vegas Philharmonic's Masterworks series is being presented on Saturday, November 19 at Ham Hall at UNLV and will feature gay composer Aaron Copeland's "Appalachian Spring." The Philharmonic's annual "Holiday Celebration," featuring the Las Vegas Master Singers, is available in matinee and evening performances on Saturday, December 17. Tickets are available at The Smith Center box office at 702-982-7805.

Christmas in Vegas is not Christmas without the Nevada Ballet Theatre's Nutcracker Ballet at the Théâtre de Paris at Paris Las Vegas, December 17-24. For tickets go to www.nevadaballet.com or call the Paris Box Office at 702- 946-4567. Season subscribers get priority seating.

The Las Vegas Philharmonic's Diamonds Are Forever Gala is planned for Saturday, January 14, 2012 at Four Seasons Hotel Las Vegas, honoring Dee and Donald Snyder. Gala tickets are available at \$500 a pop at the Philharmonic office, call 702-258-5438, ext. 221.