

Collections

# The black box opens up



The bright new Spruce Street entrance for the studio is to be unveiled Thursday. The space is funded by financial-services firm SEI. (TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer)

## Kimmel presents the SEI Innovation Studio, with cutting-edge arts, theater.

By A.D. Amorosi, For The Inquirer

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The Kimmel Center is shining a light on its black box.

The center's Innovation Studio has long been a forgotten space, a rehearsal room turned into a no-frills performance space that hosted second-rank touring productions.

All that is changing.

On Thursday, the Kimmel will unveil an inviting glass entrance on Spruce Street for a re-branded SEI Innovation Studio, and show off improvements made to the 200-seat black-box theater with funding support from SEI, the financial-services firm based in Oaks.

Kimmel officials also will announce rotating exhibitions and installations from the art collection of SEI chairman and chief executive officer Al West, and programming in jazz and theater that promises to engage cutting-edge artists and younger audiences in the SEI Innovation Studio. (Neither the Kimmel nor West would disclose the amount of SEI's gift.)

"The idea of the Kimmel is to make ourselves available to the broadest, most diverse audience," says Kimmel president and chief executive officer Anne Ewers. "To attract all age ranges and financial capacity, we want art relating to every demographic."

Jay Wahl, the Kimmel's artistic director for programming and presentations, is overseeing the makeover of the once underutilized black box (the theatrical term for a plain performance space), located in the center's basement.

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When Ewers arrived in 2007, the studio was a rehearsal room. She turned it into a black box, intended for flexible theatrical use. Wahl, who first arrived at the Kimmel in 2009 to produce the Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts and acquired his present title in October, found that the black box had become "unfocused," a home for what he agrees was an "odd assortment of rentals" from independent producers with goofy shows such as *Girls Night*, a musical geared toward bachelorette parties; hardly the stuff of a prestigious performance arts center. "I can't say that the studio was used often or to its fullest," Wahl says.

Ewers, meanwhile, had a master plan for the Kimmel, including reconfiguring Innovation Studio. "Our first projects focused on improving acoustics in Verizon Hall, renovations to Hamilton Garden, and moving our restaurant to Plaza level," says Ewers, who received \$7 million from the Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and was in search of matching funds from West.

"West was really interested in Innovation Studio," Ewers says. "So, over a two-year period of cultivation, we were able to develop, together, the studio we had long hoped for, and more."

SEI focused on the Kimmel's black-box theater for its donation because "we're known as an innovative company and strive to meet that challenge," West says. "Innovation is in our DNA, so [our donation] suited the Kimmel's needs and our notions of branding."

West, whose wide-ranging West Collection includes 2,500 individual pieces from emerging artists, saw Innovation Studios as a place for creative practitioners whose work "hasn't reached the mainstream yet. We like that."

Ewers and Wahl liked that as well. The first cosmetic changes to SEI Innovation Studio make its Spruce Street entrance visible. "People never knew we were down there," Ewers says. There's also a new rotating art gallery in Innovation Studio's lobby, with pieces on loan from West. Among them are Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts alumna Astrid Bowlby's "Everything Drawings" and sculptor Jonathan Schipper's "The Slow, Inevitable Death of American Muscle," an installation of interactive car-crash art. Joke with West about introducing a car crash as the first work in his relationship with the Kimmel and he laughs. "I know. It's not something you'd expect."

That sort of unexpected edge is what Wahl wants for SEI Innovation Studio programming. Hired to produce the Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts in 2011, Wahl first stretched the boundaries of Innovation Studio with experimental musicals and avant-garde dance from Philadelphia scene veterans such as InterAct Theatre's Seth Rozin and choreographer Rennie Harris.

"I wanted to cultivate good work exclusively for that space that got audiences used to what that studio could be," Wahl says. Using grants from the Knight Foundation and the Hearst Foundation, Wahl booked residencies for such performers as the expanded, drag-based Bearded Ladies for PIFA 2013. SEI Innovation Studio's programming commences with two residencies: a cross-genre jazz residency, with local composers collaborating with unlikely coconspirators, such as the teaming of trumpeter Josh Lawrence with multi-instrumentalist Tim Conley and bassist Jason Fraticelli; saxophonist Bobby Zankel and viola player Diane Monroe with choreographer Raphael Xavier; and mod-mambo king Pablo Batista with a team of ancient folk-rhythm specialists. They will all perform in the Kimmel's Summer Solstice program, scheduled for June.

SEI Innovation Studio's theater residency is led by Obie-winning, one-woman-show performer Dael Orlandersmith, with national and local actors and playwrights producing several works, one of which will be produced in the studio in April. Local thespians and writers connected with this residency are Mary McCool, Brian Osborne, James Ijames, and Mary Tuomanen.

"What's exciting about the SEI Innovation Studio is that this is the future for what a Kimmel Presents product can be," Wahl says.

Mention the immediate future of the Kimmel to Ewers - SEI's black box, the Perelman Theater's film focus, this winter's arrival of Iron Chef Jose Garces' boutique restaurant, Volver - and the space is beginning to look like a one-stop-shopping space for all forms of art and entertainment. "That's a brilliant way of putting it," Ewers says. "That should be the goal."

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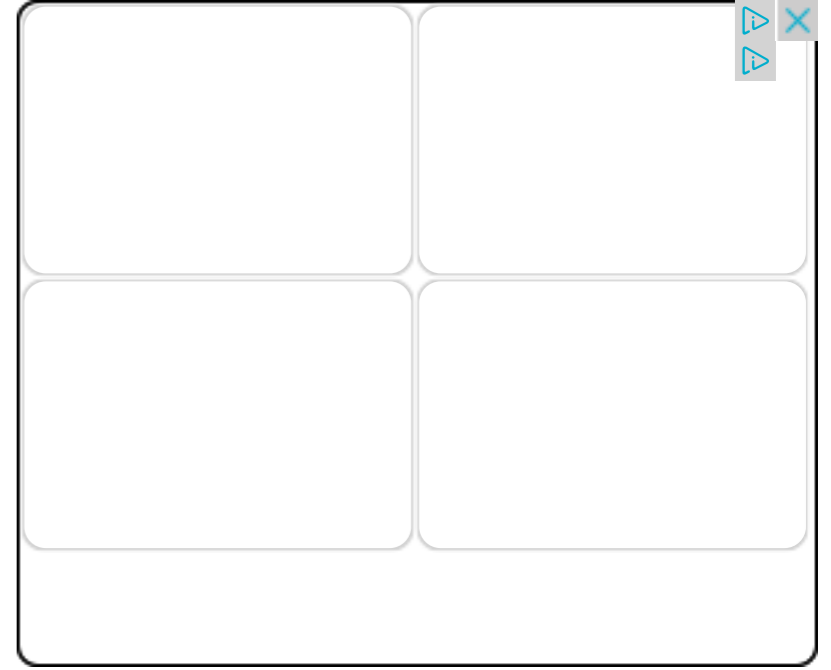
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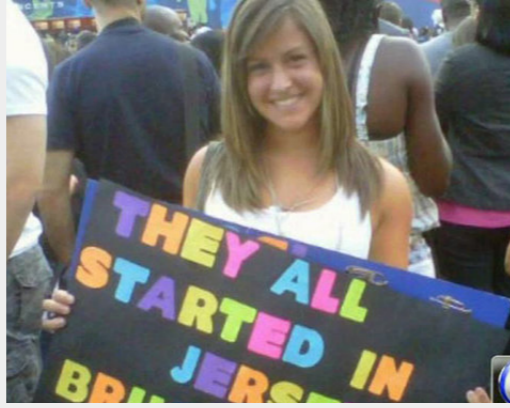
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