

Despite slow rentals, Gusman capital campaign moves on

By ELSIE PUIG

Despite being dark for most of this year, the Gusman Center is moving forward with a capital campaign set to kick-off next spring, Director Margaret Lake says.

Rental of the theater has fallen from 118 days in 2007-08 to a projected 90 days for the current fiscal year to end Sept. 30.

"The calendar is not where I want it to be, because we are subject to the needs of the rental market," Ms. Lake said, "but we are moving in the right direction."

To ensure the long-term viability of the Gusman Center, she is working to transform the theater into a self-producing "cultural epicenter for a working, living and walking downtown."

To that end, Friends of the Gusman, the non-profit arm of the Gusman Center, is launching a capital campaign in spring of 2010 that is to create an endowment meant to yield production dollars. The endowment funds will allow the Gusman Center to buy name acts, promote its own shows and retain revenue.

"We want to move beyond simply serving as a rental venue and toward producing and promoting our own concerts and

shows," said Ms. Lake, "but in order to do that we need money."

The total operating budget for the center has decreased about 8.5% from the current fiscal year to a projected \$1.22 million in 2009-10.

Endowment funds will be divided between co-producing small community events and bigger national events; co-production will enable the Gusman Center to share costs and revenue of production with the promoters. A portion of the funds, Ms. Lake says, will be used to partially subsidize educational programming in order to ensure the growth of future audiences.

"Now that there are a lot more people moving in [to downtown], there is incentive to get more programming, the energy level is really high and there is interest in going to shows," said Robert Geitner, a member of the Friends of Gusman board and senior manager of marketing and communications with the Miami Downtown Development Authority.

Currently, the Gusman Center's operating budget consists of 30% subsidy from the City of Miami and 8% from the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs. The remain-



Photo by Maxine Usdan

Gusman Center Director Margaret Lake is working on getting an LED sign in the marquee as part of an effort to upgrade the exterior.

ing budget comes from renting the Gusman Theater, concessions sales and equipment rental.

"We would like to see foundations, sponsors and individual donors contribute to the endowment to ensure that there will always be programming in the theater, even when the rental market is not so strong," said Ms. Lake, adding that after the market crash, the center lost some of its regular renters such as Ballet Gamonet Maximum Dance Co. and the Concert Association of Florida.

Andrea Dougherty, president of Rhodes Arts Consulting, said

the Gusman does not get the support it merits.

"Despite its exceptional acoustics and sight lines, the Gusman has long-struggled with an identity crisis stemming from lack of interest from its ownership, the City of Miami," said Ms. Dougherty, a former senior program administrator with the Miami-Dade Department of Cultural Affairs.

"Without significant capital and personnel investments, a self-producing arts organization is unable to ensure the quality of its productions," she said. Pro-

duction and artistic partnerships must be established, she added.

The Gusman Center will be presenting a summer film series featuring *The Wiz* with Michael Jackson, *Fame* and *Flashdance* on Aug. 13, 20, and 27.

Meanwhile, Ms. Lake negotiating with several presenters to get programming for the fall season.

"I feel a necessity of creating a sense of Miami pride, where people feel the Gusman Center is home, a theater of the people where they can go and enjoy a great concert or attend a film," Ms. Lake said.

While a great deal of work has been done on the inside of the Gusman, efforts are under way to make a key upgrade to the exterior by installing a Light Emitting Diode, or LED, sign in the marquee.

"We have a sign that is currently almost obsolete," she said via e-mail. "We have priced out a few LED signs ranging from \$60,000 to \$180,000, depending on resolution and white light vs. color."

The Olympia outer marquee will always stay, she said, but it is the interior boxes on the front, east and west sides that need to be replaced.

"Currently, we have no funds to replace the sign and are servicing the old sign as best we can until we raise the funds."