



RANDY DORST/staff photographer

Jamie Mason put the professional caliber touch to the Wallace Smith Theatre for the Performing Arts on Orchard Ridge Campus, Oakland Community College.

## Performing arts

### Veteran thespian carves niche on campus for quality theater

By Mary Rodriguez  
staff writer

Ossie Davis loaned his talents to a children's workshop there last summer. The Michigan Opera Theatre, Harbinger Dance Company, and Detroit Chamber Winds are on schedule for 1988.

Sometimes Jamie Mason thinks he is presiding over the best kept secret in Oakland County — professional

calibre theater in the heart of Farmington Hills.

Mason is director of programming for the Smith Theatre on the Oakland Community College, Orchard Ridge campus.

He describes the evolution of the six year old theater as "a roller coaster. We've spent three or four years deciding where we are, where we're going. It's been difficult. We're still trying to get a handle on it."

THE THEATER named for Wallace Smith, veteran OCC instructor and drama curriculum chairman, has weathered several top administrative changes on campus. Like any political structure, some chieftains have been more supportive of the arts than others.

In trying to carve its own niche, Mason also has been sensitive to theater offerings already in place in metro Detroit.

"We're trying to avoid repetition of services with Oakland University, the University of Detroit, and Wayne State's Hilberry and Bonstelle Theatres," he said.

Mason is the first program director of the Smith Theatre, hired on the spot, he says, after flying in for an interview from central Oregon, where he managed a dinner theater production company.

He recalls being immediately impressed with the new facility, which seats 450 — "It has wonderful acoustics, good lighting, and the thought of ten camera drops for videotaping."

his voice trails off.

MASON WAS suited for the job, with bachelor's and master's degrees in acting/directing from the University of California at Riverside. He had also worked with the director of the Oregon Shakespeare Theatre and taught at Riverside City College. He also did a teaching stint at Creighton University in his hometown of Omaha, Neb.

"Generally (a college) builds up an academic department in theatre before (building) a center. In the beginning, there was just me and Wallace Smith putting ideas together. The theater department was low key."

"The multi campus system also makes it difficult. There are lots of fine classes but not that total push to build up a theater department."

A task force on the fine arts was created to decide a direction for the theater both performance wise and for educational use.

"We found that some of the high schools in the area didn't know we existed," Mason said.

A new chancellor and new oceans were moving into place during this time.

"While all this was transpiring, we put together a program for utilizing the theater during down time."

Thus the summer arts program was born. For the past two summers, Mason has presided over summer workshops for elementary and high school students interested in theater — and bolstered by area professionals who work with the children.

Culmination of last summers' two six week workshops were productions of "Jacques Brel" and "Oliver". Next summer Mason hopes to expand to three workshops and add voice training to the course offerings.

CURTIS ARMSTRONG, a Michigan actor best known as Alice Dieste's boyfriend on "Moonlighting" was scheduled to play the lead role in OCC's "Man of La Mancha" before his ABC contract put a glitch in that plan.

"He still owes us a favor," Mason said.

Besides the summer theatre and the visiting professionals, the theatre department is staging its own spring production of "The Crucible".

"There's really a plethora of activity here," said Mason, noting that the theater department has utilized the talents of OCC culinary arts students to offer dinner theater. On tap for January and February are productions of "Oh Coward" and "Jacques Brel."

The Smith Theatre also rents space to local businesses for seminars. IBM, the Budd Co and Real Estate One have been customers.

"We have these facilities and we're very competitive price-wise," said Mason, noting the campus proximity to I-696 and its academic atmosphere that many businesses find attractive.

From May 1986 to May 1987, more than 44,000 visitors were on campus for meetings, conferences and workshops.



*'We've spent three or four years deciding where we are, where we're going. It's been difficult. We're still trying to get a handle on it.'*

— Jamie Mason



### Her very own room.









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