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Conrad Prebys Amphitheater Dedicatory Performance Showcase

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President, Indiana University

Prebys Amphitheater

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5:30 p.m.

## 1. FROM THE ROLLING HILLS OF ANCIENT GREECE TO THE ROLLING HILLS OF SOUTHERN INDIANA

It has often been attested that the Greek amphitheater developed, in part, because of Greece's favorable geography and climate. Many of the major cities of ancient Greece were located on rolling hills, which provided ideal acoustic conditions for amphitheaters.<sup>1</sup> Greece's mild climate also made open-air theaters feasible, and, in fact, all of these elements also helped democracy itself to flourish as they allowed large numbers of the general population to gather for publicly shared experiences that were of enormous artistic, social, and political relevance.

Amphitheaters also allowed for the development of ancient Greek drama and comedy, in part because they allowed the human voice to be heard by large audiences for the first time. Amphitheaters were home to regular theatrical festivals and competitions, and in this atmosphere, the great Greek playwrights—Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, and others—produced a body of work that changed Western literature forever, and that remains, 25 centuries later, among the greatest human cultural accomplishments. The immediacy of the representation of the heroic myth is, perhaps, the defining feature of Greek tragedies in particular, and one of the main reasons they remain relevant today.

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Blesser, Linda-Ruth Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?: Experiencing Aural Architecture*, 95.

Of course, winters in southern Indiana are not quite as mild as those in Greece, but we are known for our rolling hills—so, it is only fitting that, today, we dedicate the newest addition to Indiana University’s superb performance spaces—the Conrad Prebys Amphitheater.

## 2. EXCELLENT FACILITIES FOR THE ARTS

This splendid amphitheater, as I mentioned, is the realization of a long-held vision for the Bloomington campus.

During Herman Wells’ presidency, Otto Eggers, of the renowned New York architectural firm, Eggers & Higgins, designed a large outdoor amphitheater in 1939 that was intended to be built on the gently sloping ground on the south side of the Fine Arts Plaza.<sup>2 3</sup> But, as Herman Wells wrote, “by the time we were ready to build the theater, the public had become so accustomed to air conditioning that there was little desire for outdoor performances and assemblages.”<sup>4</sup> The Lilly Library was subsequently built on that site.

The Fine Arts Plaza, centered around Showalter Fountain and the IU Auditorium, has continued to develop over the years, with the addition of the Fine Arts Building; the IU Eskenazi Art Museum; the Lee Norvelle Center, which is home to the Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance; and the IU Cinema—all of which have become beloved campus treasures that reflect the university’s unwavering commitment to the arts and humanities. The Fine Arts Plaza is also home to the highly successful First Thursdays Festival, a monthly festival featuring live music, dance, theatre, and food.

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<sup>2</sup> Herman Wells, *Being Lucky*, (IU Press, 1980), 200.

<sup>3</sup> James Capshew, *Herman B Wells: The Promise of the American University*, (IU Press, Indiana Historical Society Press, 2012), 248.

<sup>4</sup> Wells, 200.

Of course, just a few hundred yards from the Fine Arts Plaza, the Musical Arts Center and other facilities of the world-renowned Jacobs School of Music are home to some of the world's most talented music students as well as the internationally celebrated performers, scholars, and teachers who comprise what has been called the single greatest gathering of music faculty in the world.

In recent years, a number of faculty committees and other groups have assessed the state of facilities that support the arts and humanities. One such assessment, a 2007 report from the Arts and Humanities Infrastructure committee, chaired by Susan Gubar, underscored the need for “more and better-suited space on campus in order to achieve optimum capability”<sup>5</sup> in the arts and humanities.

A report from the 2010 Board of Aeons, a group of student leaders who advise me on matters related to this campus, specifically noted the lack of outdoor performance venues and recommended that we revisit the plan to construct an amphitheater.

And so, today, we dedicate the magnificent Prebys Amphitheater, which will be used for performances—in all but the coldest months—by students and faculty of the Jacobs School of Music and the Department of Theatre, Drama and Contemporary Dance, as well as performances by visiting artists.

### 3. SPECIAL THANKS

There are many people to whom we owe our thanks for helping us reach this moment. First among them, of course, is the man for whom this amphitheater is named: the late businessman, philanthropist, and IU alumnus, Conrad T. Prebys.

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Gubar, “Creating the Future, Preserving the Past,” A report on Arts and Humanities Infrastructure at Indiana University Bloomington. 2007.

In 2015, I had the great pleasure of announcing that Mr. Prebys had generously donated \$20 million to Indiana University and the Kelley School of Business. His extremely generous gift provided support for the Prebys Career Services Center at the Kelley School, which is now under construction. His gift also supports student scholarships and faculty chair endowment programs in the school. And, of course, his generous gift made possible this magnificent new outdoor amphitheater for musical and theatrical productions.

Mr. Prebys was raised in South Bend. As a young man, he studied the piano while he was recovering from a serious, yearlong illness. His piano studies led to a life-long love of the arts.

While a student at IU, Mr. Prebys took theater classes in addition to his business classes, took part in student productions, and was a member of the national theatre honors fraternity, Theta Alpha Phi.

After graduating with distinction from the Kelley School of Business in 1955 with a bachelor's degree in business, he went on to become a highly successful developer of affordable, middle-class homes in Southern California. He later shifted his focus from construction to property ownership and owned more than 80 properties in the greater San Diego area.

A renowned philanthropist, Mr. Prebys gave hundreds of millions of dollars in support of a wide range of causes, including medical research, education, wildlife care, and the arts. He supported San Diego's Old Globe Theatre, a professional theatre company whose flagship theatre is modeled after the original Globe Theatre in London, where many of Shakespeare's plays were originally performed. Mr. Prebys served on the Board of Directors of the Old Globe along with his good friend Audrey Giesel, an IU alumna, and the widow of Theodore Giesel, better known as Dr. Seuss.

On behalf of Indiana University, I would like to once again extend our deepest condolences to Mr. Prebys's loved ones, and our most sincere gratitude for his enormous generosity.

I also want to commend Vice President for Capital Planning and Facilities Tom Morrison, as well as the many design and construction professionals, both internal and external, who played major roles in this project.

And in particular, I want to commend Jonathan Hess, president of Browning, Day, Mullins, Dierdorf, who served as the principal architect for this splendid amphitheater.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: ARCHITECTURAL BEAUTY, A SWEEP OF HUMANITY

A century ago, Margaret Anglin, who was widely regarded as one of the most brilliant dramatic actresses of the early 1900s, was staging a series of highly-acclaimed productions of the great Greek tragedies at venues that included the Hearst Greek Theatre at Berkeley, Carnegie Hall, and the Metropolitan Opera House.

This experience led her to reflect on the differences between the ancient and the modern stage. She wrote: "There is a spiritual exaltation in the architectural beauty of the Greek theater. There is a sweep of humanity that encircles the (performer), as the sweep of the hills encircles an amphitheater."<sup>6</sup>

Ms. Anglin was writing from the perspective of a performing artist, but, of course, in venues like this, "a sweep of humanity" also encircles audience members, as artists on the stage give voice to profound human experiences, ideas, and feelings. As they explore the depths of what it means to be human, they expand our sense of what it means to be alive.

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret Anglin, "Playing Greek Tragedy," *Hearst's Magazine*, Volumes 27-28, July 1915.

The performances we are about to witness as part of today's dedicatory showcase will illustrate this very well. All of us look forward to witnessing the future heights of artistic creation and expression that future generations of IU students and faculty members will reach in this splendid new venue.

Thank you very much.