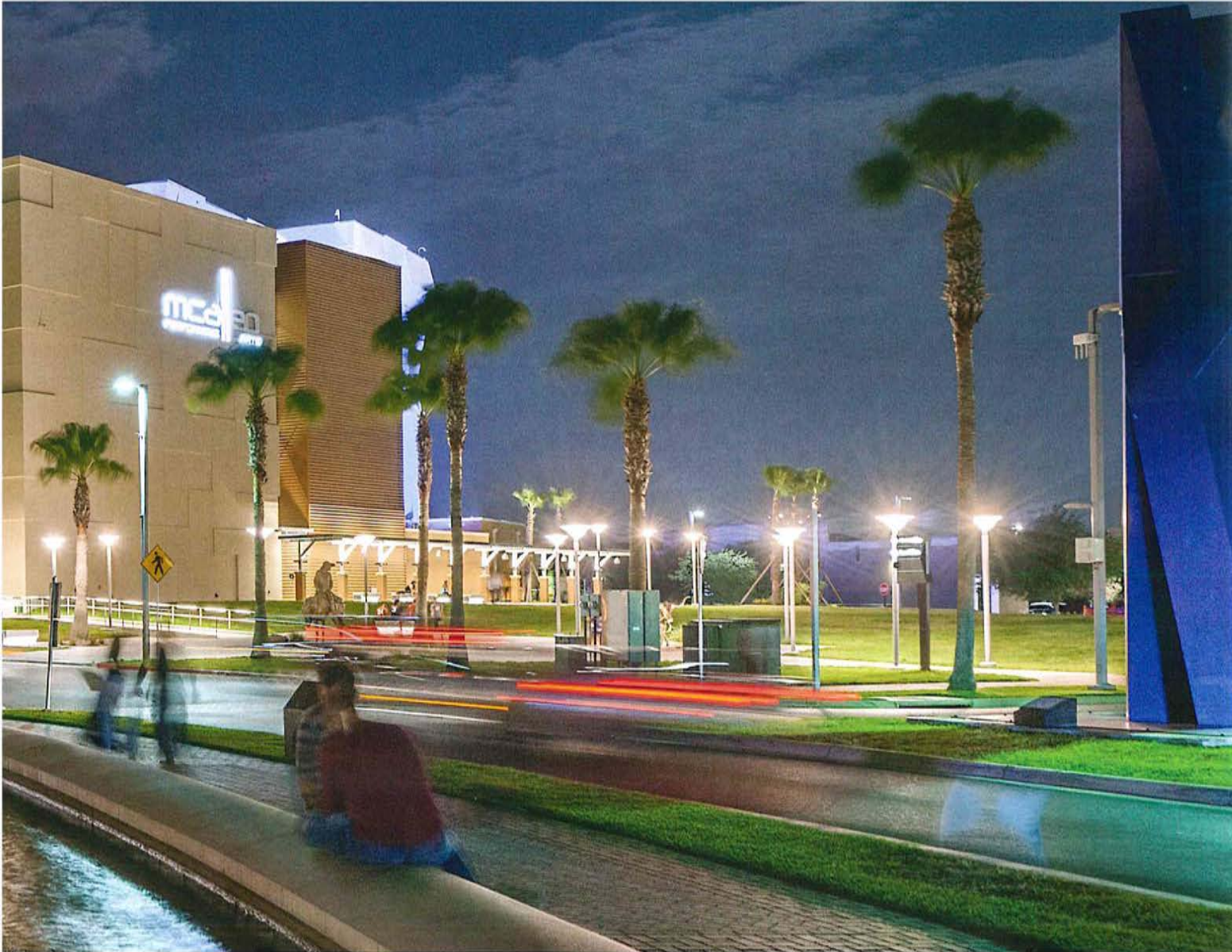




NEW FRONTIER

BY ROBERT GRAY

IN ITS FIRST YEAR, THE MCALLEN PAC HELPED TOURING ACTS, ESPECIALLY IN THE CULTURAL SPACE, DISCOVER **SOUTH TEXAS**



In its first year of operation, the McAllen Performing Arts Center has become a bright light in the cultural scene of South Texas, drawing a diverse schedule of acts.



"FEELS LIKE THE First Time," the hit by classic rockers Foreigner, could be an unofficial theme song for the McAllen (Texas) Performing Arts Center, artists performing on the venue's nascent stage, and many of the patrons.

The state-of-the-art facility, located in the Rio Grande Valley about 10 miles north of the Mexican border and 240 miles due south of San Antonio, celebrated its first birthday in November 2017 and is bringing acts and shows to town that until now haven't played the area as well as several that haven't been to the region for years — including Foreigner.

The band kicked off its 2018 tour playing to a sold-out house, Foreigner's first performance in the area in 15 years, according to McAllen PAC officials.

"We're seeing shows that would've never considered the market (before the McAllen PAC opened)," said Omar Rodriguez, director of convention facilities for the venue. "It's an audience that hasn't seen many of these shows. Seasoned shows can come here and the appreciation is here."

In fact the venue's first major run was the musical "Annie," which packed the 1,829-seat hall and provided access to a new form of entertainment for the nearly 4 million people that live in a 90-mile radius of the center.

"'Annie' is more of a family show, for young kids. My kids went to their first musical ever," Rodriguez says, add-

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SPOTLIGHT

ENTERTAINING TEXAS

"The McAllen Performing Arts Center is one of the most beautiful theaters I've ever performed in. They don't make them like this anymore."

- Tony Bennet

ROUTING DISTANCE

(in miles)

157 - Corpus Christi
167 - Laredo
238 - San Antonio
312 - Austin
346 - Houston
150 - Monterrey, MEX

1,800

Seats distributed
on 4 levels

1.3M

Metro population

\$1.6M

2017 Gross
ticket sales

MOST ADVANCED

PAC south of
San Antonio



Scan to access
video tour



For booking information, contact
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PERFORMING ARTS CENTER
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Clockwise from top left: “Annie” sold out its run at the McAllen PAC; the center has 1,829 seats on three levels; crooner Tony Bennett showed off the room’s acoustics when he dropped the mic and sang unaccompanied.

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ing, “Their eyes popped, and that’s what we’ve brought to McAllen — the opportunity to bring these shows and give them the full experience.”

Texas is known for a vibrant music scene across genres, and the venue opened with Tito Puente Jr., but the lineup has also featured a number of ethnic dance troupes including Shen Yun as well as both the Moscow Ballet and Russian Grand Ballet. Rodriguez says locals have flocked to support these performances as well as the touring “Dancing With the Stars.”

The longtime facilities executive stressed that the venue was designed to accommodate every piece of scenery and equipment necessary to put on a full traveling Broadway show. He proudly noted that “Annie” fully loaded out onstage and that nothing was left on the truck. This is opening doors to bigger acts that Rodriguez says would not have previously considered McAllen.

“A lot of the dock was built for ‘This is what “Phantom of the Opera” needs,” Rodriguez said, referring to the Broadway classic’s legendary set. The depth of the stage is 57 feet, “the proscenium opening is 75 feet wide (and) the height is almost 95 feet,” noted Rodriguez. “We didn’t want to have

The venue was designed to handle a full traveling Broadway show.

to make another investment to bring in these shows.”

The McAllen PAC is angling to bring in not only seasoned shows but also other big-name acts who may want to extend their stay in the Lone Star State, play to new audiences, and add a few dates for this city south of Edinburg, Texas, that was previously uncharted for many booking agents.

The facility is cashing in on its relatively remote location and lack of competition for major cultural events. “There isn’t any ‘nearby,’ that’s what is interesting about this market, when you come in from Houston or San Antonio,” Rodriguez said.

He notes the State Farm Arena in neighboring Hidalgo attracts rock shows, ice hockey and arena football, but adds, “We’re coming up on the cultural map. What the performing arts center is adding is the next level, the cultural stuff. ... We’re the perfect distance for that next stop when you go to the major markets in Texas. It’s worth extending your week in Texas.”

COOL DESIGNS

The venue’s design was inspired by its local environment, with perhaps a bit of that sensibility that everything’s bigger in Texas. After all, the main entrance’s lobby ceiling is six stories high. The color scheme is designed to represent the elements and help cool patrons, according to Rodriguez, who explains: “Inspirations for the design and colors came from sunsets on the Rio Grande River — deep purples and blues and magentas, and a sense of coolness. We have a lot of hot days here.”

The wide stage not only accommodates traveling Broadway shows but also creates a home for the Valley Symphony Orchestra, yet the venue can be accorded to handle more intimate concerts with adjustable acoustics (acoustic drapes) and the ability to scale down the room.

COURTESY McALLEN PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

BUILDING BRIDGES AS TALK CENTERS ON A WALL

THE McALLEN (TEXAS) Performing Arts Center, about 10 miles north of the Mexican border, is literally bridging a cultural gap in an area that has taken center stage in the national debate over building a bigger wall between the U.S. and Mexico along the Rio Grande.

Omar Rodriguez, director of convention facilities for the McAllen PAC, says even if President Donald Trump gets the larger and extended wall he wants, the show will go on at the venue. The city of McAllen has a pair of international bridges with passport controls facilitating free trade and the flow of family and friends visiting across the border. Those bridges also bring in patrons and performers.

"It won't affect us any differently than in San Diego," Rodriguez said, adding, "The wall is more of a political statement. There's always been a border to cross and INS and border patrol (that) people have to deal with to cross the border. The folks that can legally cross will continue to do so. (The issue) hasn't affected those crossings."

This is important in a community that has a larger addressable market in terms of population south of the border. Rodriguez puts their target market in a 90-mile radius on the Mexican side at 2 million to 2.5 million people, compared with 1.3 million on the U.S. side of the river.

"Sometimes the rhetoric in Washington and even in Austin gets beyond what's going on on a daily basis," noted Rodriguez, a 32-year McAllen convention and arts venue veteran. "Politicians go for the photo op. It's not the fantastic economy here, (but) they're going to the wall or the bridge. That's the photo op the rest of the country gets of us."

While many national acts and their booking agents could draw negative preconceptions from news stories focusing on the wall, NAFTA and immigration, Rodriguez said he had gotten rave reviews from traveling artists who have played the PAC for the warm reception from the McAllen audience and the community.

"At the political level, it's 'how bad everything is,' but when they get here it's 'how good it is.' That's refreshing to hear," Rodriguez said. "Hopefully they pass that on to the next artist who gets an offer to come here. They're going to have a good time when they come."

— By Robert Gray

The venue's acoustics got a serious improv test from none other than Tony Bennett. The crooner surprised the crowd, and McAllen PAC officials, when he dropped the mic at his show on that stage and sang a cappella. Rodriguez said the venue passed that test — they could hear Bennett in the upper balcony.

The singer was equally impressed, saying afterward that McAllen "did it right" in constructing the venue and designing the acoustics, according to Rodriguez.

The McAllen PAC sold out 30 percent of its 71 shows in year one. The venue is building on its strong inaugural lineup, which also included "Jersey Boys" along with the sellout runs of "Annie" and Shen Yun.

Looking ahead at marquee names, Rodriguez is excited about another well-known first-timer for this market: 1960s icon Frankie Valli. Yanni and a full-week run for "Les Misérables" are other shows the McAllen PAC official says may help lure other bold-face name acts to this stage down the line: "We're showing Broadway our market can sustain the kind of show that needs to be here for the longer run."

He says there are opportunities to work more closely with local corporate sponsors and activate around big acts in year two.

Asked what lessons he would share with others developing a similar venue, Rodriguez doesn't hesitate to say that everyone, including the opening-night artist, needs to be flexible because construction may take longer than projected: "Add another 30 to 60 days to the contractor's date to be ready. It'll take you that long to get your equipment in and understand everything that's going on with that. Get your staff on early, up to a year out, to have them engaged to support artists." ■