

Carter Redwood, a native of Pittsburgh's Hill District, feels exhilarated, buoyed by an acting career that was nurtured on the stages of his hometown and now has taken off, seemingly headed for high altitudes.

After receiving a bachelor of fine arts degree from Carnegie Mellon University last year — along with the School of Drama's John Arthur Kennedy Award for Acting — Mr. Redwood moved to New York City to launch his chosen profession in a reprise of the "Gertrude Stein SAINTS!" musical production that won him and cast members two awards at the New York International Fringe Festival in 2013. His artistic accomplishments this year include speaking roles on CBS television shows "The Good Wife" and "Madam Secretary."

But if the August Wilson Center for African American Culture calls with work, he said, he'll accept without hesitation. As a founding member of the center's Theatre Ensemble, he fondly remembers honing his acting skills there while a performing arts student at Pittsburgh CAPA high school just a few blocks away.

"The center played a major part for me [in] my arts education prior to entering training at Carnegie Mellon," said Mr. Redwood, 23, who also has done a voiceover for a national television commercial, starred in an independent feature film, and had a role in a recent North Carolina production about the legendary Tuskegee Airmen. "It's vital that the center be healthy and Downtown in the Cultural District."

His prospects for performing there may be better than ever, thanks to a new lease on life for the facility named in honor of the late Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, who also was a Hill District native. Since a foundation-led coalition prevented its dissolution last year as a regional arts institution, the August Wilson Center has been encircled by supporters from across the community who are working diligently to build the leadership, programming approach and development strategy that they hope will lay the groundwork for a successful future.

"In some ways, the center never really had a chance to deliver on its original vision, which was that it would be a dynamic center of cultural life celebrating African American culture in Pittsburgh and nationally," explained Grant Oliphant, president of The Heinz Endowments, one of the foundation coalition members. "And because the center was saddled with really a high level of debt, then suffered some management issues and operated in one of the worst recessions on record, it never really had a chance to step up and deliver on that vision."

The \$48 million center opened to great fanfare in spring 2009, but soon began to struggle. It went through bankruptcy, mortgage default, foreclosure by Dollar Bank, near redevelopment as a hotel, and sheriff's sale, where the bank bought it back in November 2014. Days later, the Endowments and the Pittsburgh and Richard King Mellon foundations — which together had bid earlier on the property — gained ownership of it for \$8.49 million in a court-approved settlement with help from the city, the county and other supporters.



"The center played a major part for me [in] my arts education prior to entering training at Carnegie Mellon. It's vital that the center be healthy and Downtown in the Cultural District."

Carter Redwood, New York-based actor and Pittsburgh native

The August Wilson Center for African American Culture has been steadily regaining its organizational footing since philanthropic, civic and community leaders prevented financial crises from reducing it to a shadow of its original vision. Now, optimism is building that the center will flourish as a regional cultural institution. By LaMont Jones

Curtain rising

ABOVE, LEFT

As a college student, Carter Redwood had a leading role on the August Wilson Center stage in the 2011 production "UPRISE: Raising Black Men Project." He played the younger version of another Pittsburgh native, Bill Strickland, a MacArthur "Genius Grant" winner and head of a renowned arts and training center.



Lois Greenfield for PHILADANCO!

encore performance

As work began over the past year on the August Wilson Center's reorganization, several arts programs were scheduled to build enthusiasm and momentum for the center's comeback. They included, from left, a performance of Philadelphia's PHILADANCO! dance company; Jacob Rajan's one-man show "The Elephant Wrestler" that looked at the tensions between modern and ancient practices in present-day India; and the "Humanae/ I AM AUGUST" outdoor photo exhibition, designed to promote the oneness of humanity by portraying individuals' "true colors."



© Robert Catto/www.catto.co.nz

The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust currently operates the facility, which is once again moving toward fulfilling its mission to become a fully functioning, financially viable arts center that attracts visitors and audiences from near and far. In August, the transitional governing board's original three members—Mr. Oliphant, Maxwell King of The Pittsburgh Foundation and Scott Izzo of the Richard King Mellon Foundation—appointed businessmen Michael Polite and Richard Taylor to the board. The foundation leaders plan to name three more board members to replace themselves as they move off the board by the end of the year, and an executive or artistic director will be hired once the permanent board is in place.

"The symbolism of the August Wilson Center is extraordinarily important to this community," said Mr. Oliphant. "We believe in what it represents. And that idea is to celebrate not only the heritage we have in terms of African American culture, but also the very vibrant African American community we still have. I'm really excited for what the future holds."

Mr. King, The Pittsburgh Foundation's president and CEO, said efforts are aimed at building momentum as measured by center visitors. "If over the next 18 months we are able to see enough programming at the center with a lot of people coming to events, and there is a sense of excitement and energy about the art that is being presented, we will feel as if we have the right momentum," he explained. "Of course, long-term success and momentum will also mean that the center generates enough revenue to help pay the bills."

For now, the sleek 65,000-square-foot center is open only for scheduled events. The Trust is working to grow programming and has scheduled at least 30 events with another 60 proposals in various stages of consideration, according to Trust President and CEO J. Kevin McMahon. Programs have included the "Humanae/ I AM AUGUST" photo exhibition on display through August 2016, an October performance of Philadelphia's PHILADANCO! dance company, and a Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company co-presentation with the Trust of Mr. Wilson's play "The Piano Lesson" in November.

"I think it's great that the center was saved," said Pittsburgh Playwrights founder Mark Southers, who directed the play and once served as the August Wilson Center's artistic director of theater initiatives. But while he supports the aims of the revitalized center, he wants to see more homage to its award-winning namesake with a statue of Mr. Wilson in the lobby, a production of one of the playwright's works every weekend, and a museum displaying Mr. Wilson's artifacts and memorabilia.

"Someone passionate about Wilson and the arts and from Pittsburgh needs to be there," Mr. Southers added, referring to the center director's office.

Mr. King noted, however, that achieving the right balance can be a tough proposition, given that "it is both the August Wilson Center and it is the African American Cultural Center.

"It is named for August Wilson, one of the greatest Pittsburgh artists, but it also serves as the center for the celebration of all African American culture. So, it must capture the spirit of Mr. Wilson and celebrate his legacy, but it also needs to have the breadth to capture the spirit of African American art here, both in historic legacy terms and in current terms."

Prospects are good for the vision to grow, said Janet Sarbaugh, senior director of the Endowments' Arts & Culture Program. She also believes that letting the center's new plans evolve slowly and organically will benefit everyone, and will "allow us to hear more community voices in designing what the new August Wilson Center will be."



Joshua Francis

Programming for the center is being promoted on several fronts. In addition to Trust efforts, The Pittsburgh Foundation created a \$300,000 pool to which 60 regional organizations can submit proposals for Afrocentric arts programs at the center in 2016.

Programming for the center is being promoted on several fronts. In addition to Trust efforts, The Pittsburgh Foundation created a \$300,000 pool to which 60 regional organizations can submit proposals for Afrocentric arts programs at the center in 2016. Programming recommendations also will come from the fledgling AWC Renewal, Inc., led by Allegheny County Common Pleas Judge Joseph K. Williams III. That entity grew out of the August Wilson Center Recovery Committee, a group that came together under the leadership of Janera Solomon, executive director of the Kelly Strayhorn Theater in Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood, to help preserve the center during its debt crisis.

"I'm optimistic," said Ms. Solomon. "Last year, we had no idea what was going to happen. There were so many anxious moments. There were many moments when I questioned whether there would be a successful outcome, but that didn't stop me from working toward it. We have so many resources available to us in Pittsburgh, and there were many people committed to seeing it through."

Like the foundation leaders, Ms. Solomon envisions the center becoming both a local jewel and a national treasure. She said she is committed to helping the center identify programming that not only attracts national artists, but that also develops local talent in their early career stages—the kind of artists she supports as head of the Kelly Strayhorn Theater.

The kind like Carter Redwood, who as a protégé of Mr. Southers came to love visiting and performing at the Downtown center.

"When things started going downhill, I was affected greatly because that's when I was involved in it," Mr. Redwood recalled. "I was disappointed that something so great could have such a hard time, and I fully support its comeback. Pittsburgh needs the August Wilson Center." **h**