

BREAKING NEWS Giants CEO Larry Baer to take leave of absence

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Berkeley's Aurora Theatre has a new artistic director — and it's an inside job



Scott Goodman/Aurora Theatre Company
Josh Costello, Aurora Theatre Company's literary manager and artistic associate, has been promoted to artistic director, replacing Tom Ross.

By **GEORGIA ROWE** | Correspondent, Bay Area News Group

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Josh Costello will become the new artistic director of Berkeley's Aurora Theatre, the company announced today.

He will succeed Tom Ross, who is stepping down at the end of the 2018-19 season.

The company didn't have to go far to find Costello, who is currently Aurora's literary manager and artistic associate. A director who has helmed productions throughout the Bay Area, he said he was eager to start the company's next chapter.

"I'm thrilled and surprised," Costello said. "Tom told me in May that he was stepping down, so I knew a change was coming. Since I've been working there for six years, I thought I might be a candidate. So I'm excited that it worked out the way it did — and very excited about what our next chapter's going to be."

Costello's no stranger to Bay Area theater. Born in Berkeley, he recalls being introduced to the Blake Street Hawkeyes while still in grade school (the company launched the careers of Whoopi Goldberg and others.) After earning his bachelor's degree at Boston University and a master's in directing from the University of Washington, Seattle, he returned to Berkeley to work at companies including Impact Theatre, Marin Theatre Company and San Francisco Playhouse. His directing credits at Aurora include "Wittenberg," "Detroit," and "Eureka Day."

Costello, who lives in Berkeley with his wife, UC Berkeley research scientist Sadie Cash Margolin Costello (she's the daughter of author Malcolm Margolin, the founder of Heyday Books), and their two children, said his Aurora experience has been unique. "I've loved working at Aurora and working for Tom," he said. "I think it's a great company. The quality of the work is really high. Tom's known for being a great director. He's very good at creating a culture where artists can do their best work."

Now Costello wants to continue the company's successes while expanding its reach. Chief among his goals is bringing in audiences new to the company and to theater itself.

"The percentage of people in our culture who go to theater regularly is very small, and I feel our culture is poorer because of it," he said. "I've always been passionate about reaching out to new audiences. At Impact, we were going after audiences in their teens and 20s; at Marin, I ran education and outreach

An example of his approach was last season's acclaimed production of "Eureka Day." Directed by Costello, Jonathan Spector's play examined the debate over school vaccinations. "It's a play by a Berkeley playwright, directed by a Berkeley director – me – about issues that really resonated with our audience."

Costello will be the third artistic director at Aurora, which was founded by a group headed by artistic director Barbara Oliver in 1992. The first seasons were in a tiny 67-seat space in the Berkeley City Club. Ross, who's been with the company since the beginning, succeeded Oliver in 2004.

Productions at the City Club, which included premieres by Berkeley playwright Dorothy Bryant, established Aurora's strong profile. "It was a tiny room with two rows of chairs," says Costello, "and Barbara and Tom made it a professional Equity company. Having a 60-seat theater that was a professional union house was unheard of, but there's a long-standing commitment at Aurora that we pay all of our actors the same rate. Nobody gets special treatment."

When Aurora moved to its current 150-seat theater on Addison Street, it retained the up-close feel with an intimate thrust space. "I love directing in there," said Costello. "Having the audience on three sides, it creates a very visceral connection that you just don't get anywhere else."

Aurora has always interspersed new works with classics, and Costello intends to maintain that mix; his next directing assignment for the company is Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest."

"Even when you're doing a classical play like 'Earnest,' you have to claim it for this moment," he said. "Our production today should be different than the one we did 20 years ago. It's about figuring out what it says right here, right now."

Costello officially starts as artistic director in August; Ross will continue in the post until then. Both will direct shows during the yet-to-be announced 2019-20 season.

Commenting on Costello's appointment, Ross said it comes at a good time. "I've had a wonderful time working with Josh as my associate for the past six years. During that time he has done a terrific job for Aurora and other Bay Area theatres and has continued to be respected by our thriving theatre community. I look forward to seeing Josh take the reins and drive the company deeper into the 21st century."

The appointment comes at a time of enormous change in the Bay Area theater world. Carev Perloff has left the American Conservatory Theatre: Pam

“There are so many theaters in the Bay Area doing different things,” said Costello. “I think that’s the sign of a really healthy community. When people come from out of town, visiting playwrights and others, they always comment on what a vibrant scene it is.

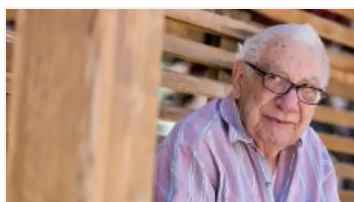
“I think what sets Aurora apart in the Bay Area is that we have this space and this location in downtown Berkeley, where we can bring in the best local artists — not just actors, but playwrights and directors — to tell these stories. It may be a play that’s been done elsewhere, or it may be something new. Either way, we’re not separate from the community. We’re the storytellers of the community.”

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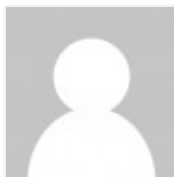


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