

Review: Timothy Near plans to resign in two years at San Jose Rep

Robert Hurwitt, *Chronicle Theater Critic*

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Timothy Near has announced her resignation after 20 years as artistic director of **San Jose** Repertory Theatre. Near plans to leave her post as of Sept. 1, 2009, allowing **San Jose Rep's** board of directors two years to choose her successor and plan the transition.

"It's a gradual separation plan," Near said by phone from her office, explaining that she felt the time was right now that the company had adjusted to its new managing director, Nick Nichols, who assumed the job a year ago. "That's been a really successful transition," she said. "Now I want to give them a lot of time to prepare for new artistic leadership."

It's a major change for the 27-year-old company. Near, its second artistic director, has shaped its aesthetic profile as she's led it to regional prominence as **San Jose's** flagship theater, overseeing the design and construction of its landmark, blue-cube theater 10 years ago. She raised the company's production standards, mounting seasons that provided popular offerings with challenging new work, reflecting her strong interest in new play development. The theater has featured the work of such artists as her sister Holly Near, Lynn Redgrave, Holly Hunter, Anne Bogart, Lucy Liu, Sab Shimono and Ronnie Gilbert, among many others.

Recurring budget problems, particularly in the wake of the dot-com bust, forced the cancellation of **San Jose Rep's** play development programs, including commissions and its popular annual new-plays festival. A major cash-flow crisis last year resulted in Nichols negotiating a \$2 million line-of-credit bailout from the city. The company is now reportedly operating in the black, but with a severely reduced budget.

"I've had 20 wonderful years here, and I feel like we've accomplished an enormous amount," Near said. "But 20 years is a third of my life, and I'm eager to see what the world has for me next. I want to have 100 percent focus on being an artist and not run an arts organization anymore."

Near said she's phasing herself out of the job, delegating some duties to new Associate Artistic Director Kirsten Brandt and others to Nichols. She's also begun doing more freelance work, having directed Opera **San Jose's** season opener, "Lucia di Lammermoor," earlier this month and preparing to stage "The Mousetrap" for Walnut Creek's Center **Rep** (where her husband, Michael Butler, is artistic director) in October. Her penultimate **San Jose Rep** season opens Sept. 28 with Lillian Groag's adaptation of

"The Triumph of Love," a major co-production that enjoyed a successful run at California Shakespeare Theater this summer.

"They always say, 'She's leaving to pursue other opportunities,' but I really am," Near added. "I'm very excited about having space to be an artist full time."

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