With University President Walter Harrison as host and senior-class members of the Hartt Music Theatre program as the stars, the University launched the public phase of the Campaign of Commitment on Sept. 29 in a transformed Gengras Student Union.

A black-tie crowd of nearly 300 enthusiastic University supporters enjoyed cocktails, a sit-down dinner, and It's ShowTime!, a theatrical review highlighting successes at the University.

A brief video featuring move-in weekend, alumni, familiar faculty members in their classes, and snippets of campus life opened the dinner, followed by “Another Opening of Another Show,” which set the mood for President Harrison’s welcoming remarks:

“Tonight we want to celebrate the University of Hartford and all of its successes. We thought about how to do it, and of course I wanted to talk about the $30 million worth of construction on campus, four years of healthy, balanced budgets, and our most talented and largest freshman class in history. Yet some said that would be boring! Therefore, we decided it best to show you the spirit of the University exemplified by the students and video you just saw.”

After dinner, It’s ShowTime! kicked off under the direction of Alan Rust, professor of theatre and director of the Theatre Division of The Hartt School. The University was musically introduced as “One (Singular Sensation),” under the baton of Michael Morris, director of music for The Hartt School Theatre Division and conductor for the Campaign of Commitment Orchestra. Lyrics were adapted to describe the University.

Supported by singers from the Community Division and an orchestra comprising Hartt School students and Community Division faculty, Hartt Music Theatre majors depicted the University as a place where a continuum of learning flourishes, as a partner with its community, and as the launch pad for success for generations of students.

In remarks following the performance, Campaign Honorary Chair Harry Jack Gray said he and his wife, Helen, have been involved with UH for so many years because they want to continue to play an important role in maintaining “what has been built here as an outstanding University.” He thanked former University President Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, “the man who is responsible for our involvement,” and particularly noted the global diversity of students on campus as an impressive achievement. “Walter Harrison certainly generated our confidence since he’s been here,” Gray added.

“Tonight we have gathered to honor this wonderful institution,” said Campaign Steering Committee Chair Peter Eio, “by showcasing its talent, its enthusiasm, and its vitality. We also wish to honor its producers—not only the producers of tonight’s program but those many producers behind the scenes who share and support our vision for the University of Hartford.”

The Hartt performers introduced the new University fight song, with lyrics and music written by Stephen Gryc, and the new
alma mater, with lyrics by Henry Fonte and music by Stephen Gryc, both faculty members at The Hartt School.

An inspirational rendition of “I Have Seen a Vision” from The Perfect 36, a musical that was performed by the Hartt Music Theatre Division in the spring of 1999, closed the program, followed by the singing of “God Bless America” by the performers and accompanied by the audience in acknowledgment of the events of Sept. 11.

A Future Home for the Performing Arts

by David Isgur

The way is now clear for the University to purchase the site of the former Thomas Cadillac dealership in Hartford and proceed with plans for the new University of Hartford Performing Arts Center. On Oct. 10, the University exercised its option to buy the 7.1-acre site and convert the three existing buildings at the corner of Westbourne Parkway and Albany Avenue in North Hartford into performance and education space for The Hartt School. Purchase of the site, planned for April 10, 2002, or before, will give The Hartt School critically needed room to expand its theatre, dance, voice, and musical theatre programs and for its growing Community Division.

University officials hope that the proposed $25 million arts facility will become a vibrant gateway to upper Albany Avenue and serve as a catalyst for economic development in the area. The University is committed to continuing and increasing its connections with its North Hartford neighbors. University students have worked in area schools for more than a decade as tutors in the Educational Main Street program; and through the University’s Center for Community Service, they have assisted a variety of community organizations, like Habitat for Humanity. Faculty and administrators helped launch the Upper Albany Business Training Network and helped community leaders gain “Connecticut Main Street” status for Albany Avenue, a designation that qualifies the area to receive state technical assistance for revitalization.

In a recent letter to North Hartford residents, University President Walter Harrison wrote, “I believe that the [University of Hartford Performing Arts Center] is a vital and exciting project not only for the University of Hartford and The Hartt School but also for our neighbors in Hartford.” The center will allow the University to offer its programs more directly to the Upper Albany and Blue Hills neighborhoods and will permit The Hartt School to develop more complementary programs with the nearby Artists Collective.

The primary need for the performance center is space for The Hartt School’s expanding programs and population. When the Fuller Music Building opened in 1962, Hartt’s student body numbered approximately 250; the Community Division’s students, approximately 1,000. Today those numbers are roughly 700 and 2,400, respectively. With the development of a dance program, the addition of a theatre division, and increased enrollment overall, space has become a significant problem.

“We are now hard at work identifying sources of support and raising money to fund this extensive project,” said President Harrison in his letter to North Hartford residents. “Raising the sort of money required to realize our plans is a long and complicated process, and we are seeking support from both government and private sources.” University officials expect about half of the funds needed for the $25 million project to come from the state and federal governments, with contributions from individuals and foundations providing the rest of the money.

University officials are also working to identify the architectural and construction management firms that will begin work on the actual design and building phases of the project. The architectural goal is to maintain the exterior character of the buildings, which were designed for General Motors by Albert Kahn (1869–1942), the Detroit-based master architect who is best known for his industrial designs for the emerging automobile industry. Kahn saw the Thomas Cadillac property, with its brickwork and large glass windows creating an open feeling full of natural light, as representative of the “automobile dealership of the future.”

The project continues to attract positive attention for the University. In August, Governor John Rowland and top officials of the Connecticut Development Authority held a press conference at the site to praise the project and commit $2 million from the “Connecticut Brownfields” program toward cleanup of the site.

University officials are also considering ways to provide space at the University of Hartford Performing Arts Center to accommodate businesses that would meet other community needs. Starbucks is exploring the possibility of opening a cafe at the site, and representatives of People’s Bank have shown interest in locating a branch office there.