Smile!

CHRISTY TURLINGTON BURNS MAKES THE WORLD BRIGHTER
North of Chicago, in Glenoe, Illinois, Writers Theatre has established a powerhouse reputation in two unassuming, undersize spaces: the back of a bookstore and a rented room inside the Woman’s Library Club. “The plumbing didn’t work, the infrastructure was crumbling, and we were dependent on the weather to finish our sets,” artistic director Michael Halberstaedt says of the library venue. “Everything around the stages bore no resemblance to the experience of watching our plays.” With this month’s opening of the 24-year-old theater company’s first permanent home, designed by architect Jeanne Gang and her firm, Studio Gang, “we finally feel our exterior matches our interior,” Halberstaedt says.

The structure—with wood recycled from trees felled for construction and bricks reused from the old library club—isn’t just an enclosed box. Timber trusses surround a second-floor walkway suspended above the glass-walled lobby—a hat tip to tiered Elizabethan theaters like the Globe, in London. The timber work nods to the suburb’s Tudor Revival style. “We wanted to create a space that connects with the village around it,” Gang says. The theater blends with its residential environs while introducing something unique. There’s no neon, and there are no flashing lights or sponsor names splashed across the facade. “People always ask me, ‘Where’s your marquee?’” executive director Kathryn M. Lipuma says. “The building is the marquee.”

Writers gave Gang a mandate for the interior spaces: Offer more seats while maintaining the theater’s intimacy. The $34 million project’s 250-seat theater, which kicks off with Tom Stoppard’s 1985 play, Aretie, on March 16, has just two more rows than the former library theater, while the smallest, flexible space holds up to 99 audience members. The lobby and rooftop terrace also double as performance areas. “It feels like almost everywhere you walk in the building something creative is about to happen,” Halberstaedt says.

—Nordd Purif