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Hot spot in the making

'Forever Plaid' will open the Cosmopolitan, a nightclub, cafe and theater complex tucked into a former dime store on K Street

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And now for something completely different.

Make that something new to Sacramento in this century.

A cabaret-style theater on K Street, the Cosmopolitan Cabaret, is preparing for a grand opening next Sunday night with a new production of the musical "Forever Plaid."

The Cabaret shares the ground floor of The Cosmopolitan building, at 10th and K streets, with Cosmo Cafe, a new restaurant from Randy Paragary also opening Sunday, and his sparkling new nightclub upstairs called Social, which opens next month. The \$15 million project is a joint effort of developer David Taylor, whose company along with CIM Group owns the building; Randy Paragary, whose company will operate the restaurant and bar; and California Musical Theatre, which will produce the shows.

The first production at the 200-seat Cabaret, "Forever Plaid" is part of what seemed a slam-dunk venture a couple of years ago when Richard Lewis, executive producer of California Musical Theatre, had the brainstorm of creating a new theater space in Sacramento.

Formerly the site of the Woolworth Building, the Sacramento Hotel and, at the turn of the 20th century, a Grange Hall, the corner had been lively in the past. All up and down K Street, Sacramento night life thrived. Theaters of all kinds once lined K Street – the National, the Metropolitan, the Capitol, the Liberty, the Hippodrome and then the Crest. But that was then, well before 1969, when the street was closed to automobile traffic. Shoppers had fled the inner city for comfy suburban destinations, but the city wanted them back and the Downtown Shopping Plaza was created (please don't call it the K Street Mall, city elders admonished). But shoppers didn't come back for long and eventually businesses left, too, – and, sorry, but it was known as the K Street Mall.

Now K Street is becoming an attractive nighttime destination with several restaurants, clubs and now a legitimate theater in the district.

Lewis wanted to duplicate the success his friend Van Kaplan, executive director of the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera, had with a small cabaret theater and a long-running show – "Forever Plaid." So once Lewis had his deal set, he brought in the same director Kaplan used, Guy Stroman, to put "Plaid" in place.

"It's absolutely thrilling, especially in this day and age, to open a new theater. We've all closed a few," Stroman said during a break from a marathon photo shoot with his cast. He was staging publicity shots showing the many moods of the show and also creating visuals for its holiday-themed productions.

The internationally successful musical lovingly offers tribute to the clean-cut, close-harmony male singing groups of the late '50s – think The Four Freshmen (well, think New Kids on the Block in crew cuts and blazers). The fictional Plaids are high school singers whose career ends before it begins.

On the way to their showcase performance, they collide literally and symbolically with a bus of Catholic schoolgirls on their way to see the Beatles' American debut on "The Ed Sullivan Show." In the play, they return from the dead to perform the concert they missed out on singing, with songs like "Three Coins in the Fountain," "Sixteen Tons," "Moments To Remember" and "Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing."

"It turns out their music was on its way out, so it was a mercy killing, really," Stroman said. He ought to know, since in 1990 he originated the role of Frankie off Broadway in New York and played it around the world. Stroman has since directed the play around the world as well and maintains great affection for it. The show was originally

written, directed and choreographed by Stuart Ross with arrangements, vocal arrangements and musical direction by James Raitt. A film version starring David Hyde Pierce is scheduled for release in November.

"If I go back and revisit it, I really want it to have an impact on the theater that's presenting it and the community where it's being done," Stroman said.

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