Any one entering the front doors of the new Hooper-Schaefer Fine Arts Center is apt to notice two things immediately:

First, a ticket booth resembling a gleaming space vehicle appears ready to blast off at you; and second, the lobby is comfortable, quite functional and about half the size of what theater-goers may be used to.

A beaming Bill Cook, director of Baylor's theater arts division and professor of theater arts, explains the lobby's size by opening his arms wide and uttering a single-syllable word—"Space."

"We wanted space in the support facilties. The lobby is not used that much. It's what's inside the stages and what's behind the stages... that's where we need the space."

And space is something the $8 million center has plenty of: 100,000 square feet to be precise.

The structure, which stands five stories tall at its peak above the proscenium theater's stage, is large enough to have replaced areas the fine arts department took up in the Carroll Science Building and the Baylor Theater complex, said Dr. Harold Simmons, chairman of the fine arts department and director of the visual arts division.

Touted as one of the finest facilities in Texas, the center is Baylor's largest building project ever. After a July 19, 1978, groundbreaking, parts of the center were opened in August, 1980, and construction was completed during the summer.

Approximately 1,250 fine arts students will work, study and play this year in the building, which was made possible by major contributors, Mrs. Lady Hooper-Schaefer of Conroe, the Milfred Lewis family of Sugar Land, and Houston Endowment, Inc.

The center is actually divided into two parts—the performing arts facilities and the Lewis Art building. The Lewis building is the home of the visual arts facilities, which include separate classroom and laboratory areas for each of seven media divisions.

There is no doubt that fine arts students would like to thank the contributors for the spacious classrooms and lecture halls, large break area and plenty-big lockers. But it's the fine arts majors, particularly the performing arts students, who would like to give the contributors a standing ovation.

For it's the three theaters within Hooper-Schaefer, something unheard of at any comparably sized university, that bring out the Shakespeare in everyone.

Immediately to the left when entering the center is Theater B, the thrust theater. Two hundred twenty-nine chocolate brown seats flank the stage on three sides. There is even a section without seats for patrons in wheelchairs.

No more than a dozen yards away is Theater A, the proscenium theater. Access to the 356-seat theater, which has all seats in front of the stage, is via two flights of stairs on either side of Hooper-Schaefer's front entrance.
Theater A, also done in earth tones, is packed with technical improvements.

The prosenium opening can easily be shrunk from 40 feet to half that. Backstage floor plugs can be popped open to transform the basement into a cave or tunnel, depending on the playwright's whim. And the orchestra pit can be raised or lowered for musical reasons or to create additional seating.

Theater 11, the experimental theater, sits behind the prosenium. The theater is named after Channel 11, KTVT in Dallas, which provided a $30,000 grant.

"You could call it a black box, but it's more than that," Cook said of this acting-directing lab, which may double someday as a television studio. The "black box" theater, which is actually hexagonal, will hold 50 to 70 people, depending on what type stage is being experimented with. A thrust, prosenium or theater-in-the-round can be whipped up in a flash by rearranging panels that hang from ceiling tracks. It is here that tomorrow's theater innovations may be born.

"Students can experiment with having the audience in the center, with acting going on around it, or just whatever type of staging [they want]. It gives the student a chance to experiment," Cook said.

Experimentation, however, won't be limited to Theater 11.

Senior design major Paul Richardson explained that it wasn't feasible last year to make the subtle but continual lighting changes needed while Shakespearean actors strolled through the forest in "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Rather than risk a botch-up, the lighting remained constant, he said. Having "the latest sound and lighting equipment that's on the market" should eliminate shying away from technically difficult effects.

From a backstage control panel that can easily be likened to that used by the great Ors to scare poor Dorothy, the Scarecrow, and friends, minor setting changes or major background scene projections can be orchestrated.

Cook says that better utilization of sound, lighting and special effects will help make treks to the theater "an exciting and entertaining experience."

"And it gives a chance to experiment. You know, this is the way this play has been done over and over and over again. So why don't we add some of the special effects that we purchased and see what it does to liven it up."

Most of the "livening up" will be controlled from the large glass-enclosed booths located above and behind the seating in Theaters A & B, which, by the way, may someday take other names.

Richardson said the new equipment and facilities have the students feeling a bit like children awaiting Christmas morning. But their Christmas will come a little early this year, on October 6. At that time Owen and Donald Davis' "Ethan Frome" will become the first play to be performed in Hooper-Schaefer.

Even though that opening is long past, Cook's summer move into the center, he doesn't expect to be immediately at home in the new environment. He expects that it will take a year or two to get comfortable, despite his having played a role in designing the center.

Cook, assistant professor William Sherry, and former technical director Bbb Guthrie visited theaters throughout the state before giving Jesse Associates of Austin a verbal blueprint of what they wanted.

The firm put those thoughts on paper, and Waco's Wither the Construction Co. made the plans materialize on University Parks Drive, using bricks that were intentionally matched to those in Burleson Hall, one of the oldest buildings on the Baylor campus.

Cook says that he got everything he wanted . . . except for a stage that revolved in the air. Still, he is more than content with the goodies he did get.

Hooper-Schaefer boasts large dressing and makeup rooms, several storage areas, a scene-making shop, movement studio, slide room and lecture hall, design laboratory, and workrooms.

The front of the building is richly carpeted and paneled and contains the faculty offices and the Ruby Laura Hooper Martin Museum and its adjoining gallery.

An October opening with a "potpourri" exhibition is planned. Professional works will be displayed in the museum. The gallery will have a different exhibition every three weeks, including works by faculty and students.

Both the museum and the gallery will be open during drama productions and are expected to do a brisk business.

The center also contains an old friend—the ghost of Baylor Theater Past.

"The Old Baylor Theater is in the basement. It's in a forest of boxes down there right now," Richardson said, adding that the moving van had to be quick to beat bulldozers that leveled the old theater to make room for a new Baptist Student Union.

Three major productions will be staged this year in Hooper-Schaefer and should draw as many patrons as four or five shows would have at the old, small Baylor Theater. Cook says after a year or so, the department should be putting on four or five productions in the spring and fall and another couple during the summer.

Simmons hopes the new facility—which he says causes touring high school students and their parents to "Ooh and Aah"—will increase the 60 to 70 theater arts majors to about 125 in about three years.

But theater arts students won't be the only folks to benefit from Hooper-Schaefer. Oral communications students will use it for their Readers Theater and, come spring, the School of Music will use the center for an opera. Baylor's biggest building project is going to see a lot of business.
Waiting for action

Photos made in August lack the activity that followed the return of students for the fall term. Right, the hexagonal stage of Theater 11; below, the 365-seat proscenium theater and the ticket booth and lobby area; bottom photo, Theater B, which seats 229 around a thrust stage.