

Curtain lifts on Gorilla Tango Theatre

Lively scene lures young owner

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"We're going for a lively hang-out sort of feel," says Dan Abbate as he paces through the dust and debris of what soon will be Bucktown's newest theater.

Abbate, the 26-year-old owner of Gorilla Tango Theatre at 1919 N. Milwaukee Ave., can visualize exactly how his performance space will look when it's complete.

Round tables will fill the long, slender first-floor room. Two 14-inch tall risers will formalize the intimate "cabaret-style" setting. Guests will sip wine and beer, as they take in an evening of improv or scripted performance.

Abbate's plan is big on dreams, but he stresses that he also has a business plan.

Unlike some small theater operations that focus on art first and hope for "a hit," Abbate said his theater is structured to handle both the "hits and misses."

Abbate, a Bucktown resident, first tested his business plan in Albuquerque, N.M., home of his original Gorilla Tango Theater.

Abbate was studying physics and math at the University of New Mexico when he realized that Albuquerque didn't have an improv scene. So Abbate decided to take a stab at starting his own theater, with the help of his parents.

The gamble paid off, and the theater opened in 2004. Currently, it's managed by a GTT



Dan Abbate is the owner of the new Bucktown venue, the Gorilla Tango Theatre, 1919 N. Milwaukee Ave. The theatre will feature improv or scripted performance. — Allen Kaleta/For Pioneer Press

employee, and Abbate acts as company CEO from afar.

While Abbate considers the original GTT a success, he said the Albuquerque theater scene only is viable Friday to Sunday.

Chicago seemed a natural

choice for GTT number two, when Abbate decided to grow the theater in a bigger city.

Abbate first got involved in Chicago-area theater at age nine. He was born in Evanston, grew up in Barrington and attended

college in Lake Forest. He also spent some time in Second City and iO's improv training programs.

"Theater here is so much bigger," Abbate said, comparing Chicago to Albuquerque.

To purchase a Chicago theater space, Abbate refinanced the GTT Albuquerque theater and pulled out some equity.

After looking for a building for a year, he settled on his current Bucktown location, due to its close proximity to public transportation at the nearby six-corner intersection of Milwaukee, Western and Armitage.

"The intersection isn't really developed, but it's coming," Abbate said.

Kelly Williams, who does public relations for GTT and also worked at the Albuquerque theater, said the building at 1919 N. Milwaukee Ave. once was home to a dry cleaner drop off location.

Williams, also a Bucktown resident, said the 12-foot high ceilings are tall enough to accommodate performance lighting and make the commercial space "feel like a theater." GTT will leave the building's brick exposed as an homage to Chicago architecture, Williams said.

Because Chicago is "alive all week long," Abbate said he's increased his revenue expectations over those he had for the Albuquerque theater.

Abbate said he hopes that people will call the GTT box office regularly to ask "what's going on this week," as they would call a movie theater on a Friday or Saturday night.

He said the theater will offer an ever-changing variety of programs, including improv, scripted shows, children's plays, music events and performance art.

"If it's legal, we'll consider it," Abbate joked.

Abbate said one goal of GTT is providing improv trained actors a place to get work experience.

When the theater is running at full strength, Abbate anticipates that about two-thirds of the shows will be produced by artists partnering with GTT, and that GTT will produce the remaining third.

GTT plans to open in mid-October with performances showing four nights a week. In November, Abbate said he hopes to bump the number of weekly shows up to five. Seven days a week of GTT theater is the goal, Abbate said. Workshops and theater classes also will be offered.

Abbate said the name Gorilla Tango Theater "doesn't really mean anything." It's just a catchy-sounding word combination that Abbate likes the sound of and has used before.

Williams said the two have joked about having a GTT contest to see who can come up with the best faux back-story for the name.

For now, Chicago is GTT's second and only city, but Abbate said he'd eventually like to take GTT to another places, such as Philadelphia, Boston, Minneapolis or Milwaukee.

For more information about GTT, call (773) 598-4549 or e-mail info@gorillatango.com.