



THE RADAR CULTURE

BY KATE TEMPLIN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNA KNOTT

Gorilla Tango founder Dan Abbate

MONKEY BUSINESS *Bucktown's new Gorilla Tango Theatre aims to be a community hub for Chicago show-seekers*

Chicago has always been a theater town, brimming with venues big, small, silly and self-important. So when Windy City-native Dan Abbate decided he was ready to add a new performance space to the bustling local scene, he knew his spot had to stand out from the pack.

The result is Gorilla Tango, a new 85-seat theater in Bucktown with a randomly chosen name but a clearly defined purpose: to become a community performance center that offers live shows in a variety of genres, including improv, drama and comedy, at least five nights a week. "We want to be an option like a movie theater," says Kelly Williams, a member of the theater's improv ensemble. "We hope people say, 'Let's stop by and see what's playing at Gorilla Tango tonight.'"

Abbate—who trained with Second City's and iO Theater's improv programs—already has had success with Gorilla's first location in Albuquerque, which he opened in 2004 while attending the University of New Mexico. Abbate, 26, started the theater hoping for creative success, but shortly after the first performance, he realized that producing and staging only his own shows wasn't going to pay the mortgage, let alone fill his coffers enough to allow for growth. It was then that his inherent business sense—the Abbate family sold their stamping and manufacturing company in Bensenville in 2001—kicked in, and he developed a new theater business model.

By partnering with other local producers, creating a kind of theater cooperative, Abbate found a way to escape the starving artist stereotype

and make his project financially successful. Gorilla Tango provides the rehearsal and performance space, the box office and some marketing and advertising, while the producer provides the show. Ticket sales are split 50/50, and the theater's only requirement is that producers clear out the space after each performance. Therefore, Abbate can maximize Gorilla's earning potential by having something constantly on stage.

This month, that stage shifts into high gear, with performances including comedic improv show *Animal Jeans* from local troupes Recessive Jeans and Hippo Horsey Donkey Monkey and Gorilla's own Dickens-inspired political satire *An American Carol*. Also check out holiday shows like Shantz Theatre's *Requiem for a Department Store*, or *How Jesus Taught Me to Shop at Macy's* and the n.u.f.a.n. ensemble's annual *Have a Kung Fu Christmas*.

While these and other performances range from the hilarious to the macabre, improv still remains at the theater's core. Gorilla's own troupe plans to perform regularly, and the theater offers a host of classes for both children and experienced improvisers. "I didn't want to compete with Second City by offering beginners-level classes," Abbate says. "Why would I? They did a pretty good job with me."

While Abbate admits his Gorilla is still just a little ape, he says if he gets his way, it will eventually become one big theater concept. "The goal is to eventually have Gorilla Tango Theatres in locations around the country." ■

Gorilla Tango Theatre, 1919 N. Milwaukee Ave., 773.598.4549, www.gorillatango.com.