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Chicago theater company plans to reopen landmark Skokie Theatre



By **Brian L. Cox** Special to the Tribune

Today at 4:04 p.m.



Dan Abbate, right, owner and CEO of Chicago's Gorilla Tango Theatre, was in Skokie Friday discussing his plans to reopen the Skokie Theatre, which his group is buying for \$420,000. Randy Miles, left, of the Independent Merchants of Downtown Skokie and owner of the Village Inn restaurant said he hopes the move will create business for all downtown merchants. (Brian L. Cox / Special to the Tribune)

A Chicago theater company is buying the recently shuttered Skokie Theatre, and officials say the curtain will once again rise on the sentimental landmark that first opened its doors 100 years ago.



Tribune File photo

Dan Abbate, owner and CEO of the Gorilla Tango Theatre in Chicago's Bucktown neighborhood, said Friday that he has agreed to buy the downtown theater at 7924 Lincoln Ave. for \$420,000. He expects to close on the building on March 12, and said live performances will start in early April. At some point, he said, movies produced by Gorilla Tango may be screened there.

Despite the theater's past financial troubles, Abbate said he's confident it has a bright future. He's turning to the community for help in ensuring he can be successful where others have failed.

The key, he said, will be running the Skokie Theatre the same way the Gorilla Tango's Theatre at 1919 N. Milwaukee Ave. in Chicago is operated.

"The trick with live performance is a focus on volume — and marketable shows," Abbate said. "I don't assume I know what's right creatively. I want people from all walks of life bringing new ideas, with the concept of 'this is sellable.'"

"We want to really focus on our kids and family programming, in Skokie we feel that's a real opportunity," he added.

The original Skokie movie theatre opened in 1912 and closed for lack of business in 2004. It was sold to Kenilworth-based Cavalcade of Music Foundation in 2004 for \$375,000. Cavalcade renamed itself "The Skokie Music Theatre Foundation" and in 2006 raised more than \$1 million to finance a complete restoration of the theatre.

The theatre reopened as a premier live performance venue in 2007. But by the summer of 2010, it was struggling financially due to the recession, combined with the loss of grant funding, and the inability of the foundation to restructure their bank loan. The venue went into receivership in July of 2010, but First American Bank had allowed it stay open until Jan. 1.

"We had talked to other suitors of the theatre," said Randy Miles, of the Independent Merchants of Downtown Skokie organization. "They just didn't fit the bill."

"The first conversation I had with Dan I asked him 'Are you open to doing community programming, to working with the school districts?'" Miles added. "He said 'That's what we're all about.'"

"We hit it off right off the bat," Miles said. "It just all kind of clicked."

Abbate, 32, founded Gorilla Tango Theatre in Chicago 2006. He said the idea was to create a year-round theatrical venue where audiences of all ages could consistently go to see a wide variety of talented artists, while providing artists with an opportunity to produce their work in professional environment.

He discovered that the Skokie Theatre was for sale as he was looking at expanding the Gorilla Tango Theatre into New York or Las Angeles, and jumped at the chance to buy the building.

"I didn't want to mess around," he said. "I didn't want this to be a big drawn-out process. It was either going to work or it wasn't."

"We're very excited to be in Skokie," Abbate added. "We're hoping we're going to be able to do some really good creative stuff here."

Skokie is not helping Gorilla Tango buy the building, but the village does hope to benefit from the Skokie Theatre's reopening, said Ann Tennes, director of marketing and communications with the Village of Skokie.

"It's not just going to bring people to the restaurants," said Tennes. "It will create activity in the entire downtown for the other merchants as well."