



STACKED LINEUP
Abbate, far right, keeps a full house with his Gorilla Tango team.

Albuquerque, where he was studying physics and math at the University of New Mexico. The 27-year-old Chicagoland native, who's been performing since he was nine and studied improv at Second City and I.O., wanted to create a place to do improv in that desert town. "There was a 6,000-square-foot building out there that had been vacant for 30 years," he says. Using money saved from Abbate's days as an early internet entrepreneur, "We bought it and developed it into a two-story complex with two theaters, rehearsal space upstairs, office space, and we opened it with the idea that it would be [for] improv exclusively."

"It's considerably cheaper to work in our structure."

Abbate soon realized that improv alone wasn't going to sustain an operation of this size—at least not in New Mexico. "We were like, Why can't we take an 'economies of scale' approach? We've already got this stuff, it doesn't cost us anything to do more since we've already got it all set up," he says. The company began reaching out to other groups to coproduce shows with them, both to plug programming holes and to find new audiences.

Gorilla Tango Albuquerque was soon humming along, and Abbate was thinking expansion. "Of course I wanted to bring it back to Chicago," he says. GTT closed on its Bucktown property in June 2006 and opened in December. The company's model of maximizing its assets by booking shows in as many slots as it can (Saturdays often see six different shows in the space, from family-friendly afternoon fare to rowdier late-night comedy) have made it a leading venue for nascent theater groups, since it's possible to produce a show for a one-weekend or even one-night run and still come out in the black.

Jonathan Thomas serves as GTT's production manager and is producing a double bill of one-acts (*Artificial* and *The Stand-In*) opening this week. "He actually had the means to do it," Thomas says of Abbate. "I think theater people get bogged down by the way things are done. If you're a nonprofit, you go out and beg from everybody who gives to starving artists. You put on a show and make back maybe half of what you spent. I think theater should be run like any other business: You keep your expenditures lower than your income. It's basic economics."

Artificial and The Stand-In open Thursday 9. See Fringe & storefront.

Tango lessons

A local storefront stages a Gorilla theater insurgency. By **Kris Vire**

Dan Abbate is doing something unique in Chicago's storefront theater scene. He's making money.

Listening to the CEO of Bucktown's Gorilla Tango Theatre talk about his business plan, you suddenly realize: Wait a minute, he has a *business plan*? Abbate tosses around phrases like "cash flow," "revenue" and "profitability" with a casual frequency that might make the city's standard, seat-of-their-pants nonprofit companies uncomfortable. But Abbate has an equal interest in helping Chicago's youngest producers get their work on stage—as long as said work is financially viable.

"We take a business approach to theater. We're very profit-oriented. We're not doing theater strictly because we like it, though of course we do like it," Abbate says. "But we also believe that if you can't create some sort of positive cash flow, then you're not going to be sustainable, and you're not going to be able to do what you want."

The GTT model is unlike Chicago theater's normal template. For starters, it's a for-profit corporation, and the company owns its Milwaukee Avenue building—both of which are practically unheard of on the storefront scene. But GTT isn't just a rental house, either. As Abbate explains it, the company acts more like a coproducer. Anyone putting up a show at GTT is invited to use the space for the entire process (including auditions and rehearsals), GTT

provides box-office and publicity.

Most remarkably, GTT doesn't ask for any money up front. Producers are charged per "show hour," which GTT takes out of the show's box-office receipts. Anything above that is split 50-50. "We basically give [producers] the opportunity to use our infrastructure as part of their responsibility for producing in our space," Abbate says, "and as long as they can produce a certain amount of revenue, we've discovered there's an advantage on their end as well. If they went out and just wrote a check to rent a performance space, and wrote a check to rent a rehearsal space, and then set up their own online ticketing and their own credit-card processing, do all their own marketing... It's considerably cheaper to work within our structure."

Abbate developed the GTT model in