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Gorilla in the house

New Bucktown theatre pins its hopes on making a profit

By LAURA PUTRE, Editor

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Christopher McMorris and Joel Vining in Gorilla Tango's first production at the theater, "A Subtle Twist of the Dog" performed by n.u.f.a.n. ensemble.

Photo courtesy of Gorilla Theatre

It took four trips to Chicago and one really weirdly configured building in Bucktown for Dan Abbate to find a home for the second installment of his for-profit theatre with the non-sequitur name, Gorilla Tango.

Though Abbate, 26, hails from the western suburbs of Chicago, he opened the first Gorilla Tango Theatre in a seen-better-days, 6,000-square-foot building in Albuquerque, N.M. in 2004. He was lured to Albuquerque—which isn't exactly known for its theatre scene—by the warm climes and the utterly practical hope that by building equity there, he could eventually invest in a second theatre in the pricier Chicago market.

Albuquerque went according to plan, and after much vain searching for a second building in Wrigleyville, Lakeview, and Lincoln Park earlier this year, Abbate finally struck gold in Bucktown with a 1,000-square-foot storefront at 1919 N. Milwaukee. The place was right next to an el stop, a three-way intersection, and a major bus line. It was in a neighborhood with "all the artsy people, and no strong theatre."

What's more, the building had been on the market for 2½ years; Abbate guesses it took so long to sell because the high-ceilinged spaced had been carved up into two floors. The second floor, he says, wasn't tall enough for the average-sized person to stand in, but it was a great hangout area if you didn't mind crawling in and sitting on a chair or couch the whole time.

The son of a metal stamping plant owner, Abbate, 26, prides himself on being "budget-minded." He says he seeks to apply his family's "hard-nosed manufacturing business plan" to Gorilla Tango, which when it opens in November will feature in-house sketch comedy and improv productions as well as plenty of work by other local companies.

"Manufacturing is extremely competitive," Abbate says. "You have to make the best use of your capacity," which in this case is a space that seats 85 people—not leaving much room for extravagance.

Abbate, who honed his comedic skills with the Second City training group and Improv Olympics before he started Gorilla Tango, says he never entertained the thought of going the typical non-profit route.

"We don't want to have to report to anybody," he says. "We earn 100 percent of our own income. It's kind of a philosophical thing, too—to promote theatre as a revenue-generating source. The movie business does the same thing."

The plan is to produce a quarter of the shows in-house, then pack the rest of the schedule with productions by other companies. Groups that contract with the theatre get full use of it for rehearsal, and are required to generate \$200 in revenue for every hour of performance time. Beyond that, the revenue is split 50/50 between Gorilla Tango and the local company. And if the show flops, the company has to come up with the cash to hit the \$200 mark.

"I generally give people a shot, and if it goes well and gets a decent crowd," they're invited back, says Abbate. "If it looks like it was slapped together, that's what I think is bad." In Albuquerque, one local company put on a "disastrous" production of a Neil LaBute play. "It was like watching a little kids' recital with the actors wandering around the stage, not knowing where they were going," says Abbate.

When the players returned, asking to use the theatre for another production, Abbate let them down diplomatically. "I said, 'Look, you guys had to pay me the last time—I don't want you to have to pay me again.'"

The Chicago schedule for November and December includes a prison drama by local company n.u.f.a.n. ensemble and improv and sketch comedy by the Gorilla Theatre Ensemble—a group that includes Abate, three improv comedians from Albuquerque, and four from Chicago. For the holidays, an original production of Hansel and Gretel is in the works for children's matinees, as is a political satire called American Carol, which has Dickensian ghosts paying a visit to the President.

"We want to offer as many different types of things as we can," says Abbate, who also plans to host concerts at the theatre and double up shows on busy nights. "It becomes more like a movie theatre in that respect. People call and ask, 'What's going on this weekend?'"

The theatre's inaugural production, n.u.f.a.n.'s A Subtle Twist of the Dog, is scheduled to run weekends from Nov. 3 through Nov. 25. Those dates could easily change, however, because Abbate says the Chicago contractors he hired—which turned out to be a company that subcontracted all its work—are far pokier and more unpredictable than his New Mexico contractors were.

The Albuquerque building, which had suffered substantial fire damage and vacant for 30 years, took eight weeks to renovate from start to finish. The Chicago building, which is six times smaller and was in far better shape, has taken eight weeks "just to get started," says Abbate. "Every morning, I come in and see what they're doing and it's wrong. I say, 'Have you looked at the plans?' 'Well, no.' It's been pretty awful. I pay for it in time." If he could charge \$200 for that kind of drama, he'd be a rich man.

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