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Gorilla Tango gives young theater groups a chance

By **JACK HELBIG***Daily Herald
Theater Critic*

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Go to the Gorilla Tango Theatre at 1919 N. Milwaukee Ave. in Chicago's Bucktown neighborhood and you will find a small, vibrant theater, carved out of an old commercial space. The space looks inviting, and the schedule is packed with shows, both in the evening and during the days on weekends, when a play pitched to young adults, a PG-rated version of "Cinderella," is performed in the children's theater slot. But there is a difference between the Gorilla Tango Theatre and your average young hopeful theater company. The Gorilla Tango Theatre was conceived as a place where other young theaters could come and produce their work as well as a place where the Gorilla Tango Theatre itself could perform.

The theater complex is the brainchild of Dan Abbate, who calls himself the CEO of the operation. He came up with the idea for Gorilla Tango Theatre while he was a student at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

"Before going to the University of New Mexico, I had spent a lot of time in Chicago's theater scene," Abbate said. "I studied at Second City. Then I went to ImprovOlympic. I was in productions at WNEP and Live Bait."

In Albuquerque, Abbate missed performing, so he put together a small improv troupe where he could blow off steam after classes.

"I wanted to do it right," Abbate said. "So I looked around to rent a storefront." And that's when two things hit him.

The first, make the theater safe and legal, which was going to cost a lot of money. And second, it was better to own than to rent.

That's when he bought a space in downtown Albuquerque, which at the time was being redeveloped, and renovated it.

"We had two theaters," Abbate said. "One with 200 seats downstairs and one with 100 seats upstairs."

To help pay his mortgage, he rented out the space to arts groups - theater companies and music producers - and that's when Abbate had his third realization: He could build a business around providing a space and ticketing services to other, small arts organizations.

Abbate opened his space in July 2004 and soon, with building management and rehearsals for his improv troupe, the Gorilla Tango Theatre was taking all of his time. Abbate dropped out of the University of New Mexico to devote himself full-time to his theater.

Abbate had a success on his hands. But he wasn't satisfied with being a big fish in a small pond.

"I wanted to bring it back to Chicago," Abbate said. "Albuquerque wasn't Chicago. It wasn't my home. So I said we are going to make another Gorilla Tango Theatre. Let's make the second one in Chicago."

Immediately he started looking for a building to buy and renovate in Chicago. After a long search, he found a space in Chicago, near both the Kennedy and the Blue Line on the CTA. "We bought the space in August 2006," Abbate said. "and were in operation by Dec. 1, 2006."

Even before he had found a building, he was looking for outside producers to use his space. He put a series of ads on the online service, craigslist.org, and began spreading the word of his new theater company and space.

"By the time we opened our doors, we were booked through April," Abbate said, smiling.

Has producing and managing a theater taken time away from Abbate's performing? Abbate denies it, pointing to the fact that he still performs twice a week in his improv troupe. And has been in several other original Gorilla Tango Theatre productions.

Like a lot of young theater people, he juggles two jobs. It is just that his straight job is owning and running a theater complex.

"Theater is a business," Abbate said. "Gorilla Tango gives producers a chance to focus on their productions."

You can find out more about Gorilla Tango Theatre and about upcoming productions by visiting [www.gorillatango.com/chicago/index.htm](#).

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