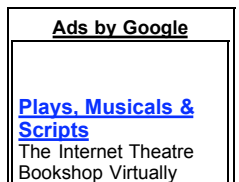
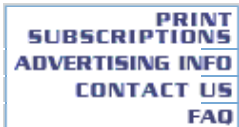
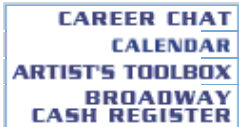




Feature Stories



Features

West May 04, 2005

Theatre From Scratch

The Theatre@Boston Court offers a recipe for building and opening a theatre.

By Les Spindle

Part One of a two-part series on starting your own company

When veteran actor-producer Eileen T'Kaye admits that a project is overwhelming, one tends to believe her. She's the epitome of professional competence, yet she uses words such as "daunting" to describe the project that has dominated her professional life for six years. She helped founder-owner Z. Clark Branson realize his dreams of creating and opening a top-level local theatre facility. The fully equipped and stylish \$5 million Theatre@Boston Court in Pasadena, which includes a 99-seat mainstage and an approximately 60-seat auditorium, opened in September 2003. Executive Director T'Kaye and Producing Director Michael Seel recently shared useful details with *Back Stage West* on the challenges of bringing a project of this scope to fruition.

Right off the bat, T'Kaye asserts that the challenges are many: planning and overseeing construction of a new building, putting together management and artistic teams, and handling the myriad deals with an initially tiny staff, to name a few. "When this project was conceived, the idea was to find a suitable space to convert, but it ultimately became clear that it made more sense to build it from scratch to ensure it was ideal for our needs," she recalls. "Conversion can be as expensive as creating a new building, sometimes, and there are often many concessions you have to make. Then you have to find the right location. You need to think about such things as the neighborhood and parking. And, in this case, as we were starting both a new theatre company and a facility, you have to think about where the audience will come from. Clark grew up in Pasadena and was aware there are not a lot of small theatres here. It suddenly made sense to go into a place that embraced culture and has a sense of community. Our hope was that the community would in turn would embrace us."

She knew Branson for many years. He has always been a patron for the arts, and he dreamed of opening an arts complex for a long time. "Over the years, he had made some really good investments, which gave him the resources to do what he had envisioned," she explains. "Instead of buying a big house, he decided to build a theatre. He bought the property and then allotted funds for the construction and launch. We entered the project knowing that we needed enough money to get us through at least a couple of seasons while we built up subscribers and started fundraising efforts, so as to continue to replace the yearly output of money."

T'Kaye's position has always been part-time; Seel and the recently appointed managing director, Cheryl Rizzo, are full-time employees. T'Kaye says the business plan includes adding

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more full-time employees gradually as the company begins to grow. Most staff members, including artistic directors Jessica Kubzansky and Michael Michetti, receive a stipend for their ongoing efforts, as well as a separate payment out of production budgets for their work on a show. T'Kaye and Seel are quick to add that all workers voluntarily put in a lot of hours beyond minimum expectations. The theatre operates under a standard Actors Equity 99-Seat plan, but T'Kaye emphasizes that the theatre pays actors more than the required minimum. "We pay \$25 per performance, which amounts to \$100 a week during the run. This isn't far from a small Equity contract, and we eventually hope to add pension funds. We are seeking corporate sponsors and other donors to help us get there. We can never go to a full Equity contract in our 99-seat space, but we hope to continue to move the compensation upward."

Of its artistic mission, Seel says the company favors new works or classics that are interpreted from a new perspective or vision: "Our *Medea* and *Romeo and Juliet* were unlike other productions of these classics. We always do a new take on something or a new translation--something to challenge the audience and the artists." Says T'Kaye, "Our directors have looked at the classics and done their research. They have demonstrated how plays conceived so many years ago can still be extremely relevant today." The theatre has thus far earned three Ovation Awards, one LA Weekly Award, and three Back *Stage West* Garland Awards, plus nominations from the NAACP and the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle.

Theatre@Boston Court does not have a membership company. "We decided not to do that, because we wanted to do multicultural casting," says T'Kaye. "Also, this is an artist-driven theatre. We don't choose the plays, then hire the directors. In a membership company, you owe it to your members to choose plays to suit them. Plays that we consider producing are pitched by a particular artist. That's usually a director, but it might be an actor. We take on the project, as opposed to hiring it out, then proceed to seek out the best actors for it. We don't want the actors to pay dues to have to work here, or to build sets or anything like that. We just want them to practice their craft." Audition notices are listed with Breakdown Services and appear in *Back Stage West* and at www.bostoncourt.com. The theatre doesn't accept unsolicited manuscripts but will consider synopses of proposed new plays for production. For solicitation details, visit the website.

According to T'Kaye, a key factor in making this sort of massive undertaking work is effective planning. She says she had never overseen the creation of a new building before, but she knows a lot of people from her years of working in the business world, and she was not bashful about calling them and asking for their advice. "There are people who have been through all this many times before," she says. "There's no point in reinventing the wheel. There's always a learning curve, but if you can find people to help you avoid the pitfalls, it will go a lot smoother. Some companies take the approach, 'Let's put together a theatre, and we'll figure out how to pay for it later.' You have to run a theatre with the same principles applied to any business, even though the arts are often more philanthropic."

Fundraising starts with the very first show. "You need to show people who you are and what you do," she says. "There are already some individuals stepping forward to support us, and our audiences continue to grow. Every time we get a call ordering a new subscription, you'll find me jumping up and down with joy." Seel says sponsorships are important: "That's a community thing, which is the right approach. We're building a wonderful board of directors, and they are helping us a lot. We're a nonprofit company, and the key fundraising results can come through your board." Adds T'Kaye: "So many fundraising-funding sources have dried up, so sponsors now have to support arts in a much bigger way, at the individual and at the corporate level."

The company is pursuing rental income in only a limited way, because the management wants the space to be fully available to the artists working on company productions. Seel elaborates: "Our schedule is always very full. We sometimes rent it out for one or two nights at a time. I don't want to have to come up to one of our directors and say, 'You can't rehearse for two hours a night, because I have something going on.' It's tough, because the rental income would be very nice, but our productions have to come first." He says the company thus far hasn't found time to consider producing its own "second season" on weeknights, as some theatres do. "We've done many staged readings," he says. "We're starting to do workshops, and two times a month we have a project called Open Court. We offer a four-hour block of time in our second space for any other artists who want to come in and use it for a workshop or a reading, free of charge." T'Kaye adds, "That's our outreach program to the community, and it's been great. Lodestone has been here, and Playwrights Arena. This is our way of giving back, of saying, 'Come play in our space.' It's open to anyone. They apply on our website [www.bostoncourt.com]."

The theatre community is likewise responding with a warm welcome, attending productions and keeping the communication lines open. Seel happily recalls the two-day open house that the theatre held in June 2003, shortly before its debut: "We didn't know if anyone would come. We thought we'd be happy to have 100 people show up, and the total attendance ended up being something like 1,200." T'Kaye says audiences for the plays are coming from all over the L.A. area, not just Pasadena.

She mentions future goals: "We're functioning as a development space, but hopefully some of our shows will go out in the world for Equity-contract runs. And it would be great to do co-productions with bigger theatres. There's one thing that must be said, in spite of all the hard work we have been talking about. This is really fun; here we are, this really happened. I'm thrilled because all of the people here have been paying their dues for a long time. It's fun to be able to give this opportunity to artists who have been dedicated to what they do and have worked so hard for it. We all still skip down the halls saying, 'Look how lucky we are.'" **BSW**

Watch for a companion article later this month on the challenges of converting an existing space.