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Beckmann will remain homeless - but sees that as a good thing

THE FIRST THING ANYONE needs to know about the Beckmann Theatre is that there isn't one. Not a theater in the sense of bricks and mortar, stage and seats.

No, the Beckmann Theatre is more an idea, a goal – one which strives to make the arts part of the lifeblood of the city, to promote theater and nurture young talent.

The second, third and fourth things anyone needs to know about the theater organization is that it is no accident that it bears the name of Robert D. Beckmann Jr., the multi-talented urban pioneer and Mass Ave resident who died in 2001 at the age of 60. And that Tom Alvarez, new president of the theater's Board of Directors, wants to make certain that the organization truly reflects the vision of the man he knew.

The Beckmann Theatre was founded in 2002 with the idea of one day gaining a permanent home. Its founders discovered very quickly that goal wasn't likely or even possible, but what they did accomplish, Alvarez said, was very strong productions such as 2005's "Asylum," local play-



▲ Last year's production, Jan Donley's "Give the Dog a Bone," was performed at the American Cabaret Theatre.

wright David Schanker's play set in the final days of Central State Hospital – and performed in the historic laundry building of the former mental hospital.

Alvarez and the newly reconstituted board he has assembled want that experience to serve as a prototype for the

THE BECKMANN IDEA: THEATRE WHEREVER YOU ARE

Beckmann Theatre. The Board of Directors has adopted a theme for the organization – “Theatre Wherever You Are.” It also created the organization’s very first mission statement: “To promote, nurture and sustain Indiana artists by providing production opportunities and professional growth through the presentation of new and classic works to diverse audiences.”

Alvarez first became involved with the Beckmann Theatre when its founders hired him in 2006 as a consultant to help with fund-raising and marketing – two areas in which the former television producer and arts administrator is well-versed. In that capacity, he got hooked on the idea behind the theater and the thought of what it could become.

What the organization lacked, he felt, was the expertise to fulfill Bob Beckmann’s vision both as an artist and an entrepreneur. “I thought that if this theater was going to move forward, someone needed to step forward.” Alvarez said. That someone turned out to be him. When the previous Board of Directors began to unravel, Alvarez accepted the helm and signed up eight new board members – people who were strategically targeted for their particular skill sets. Equally as important, Alvarez believes, is that several of those new members knew Beckmann well. A committee structure was then created, he explained, “to do all the things not-for-profits need to do to be successful. We created an energetic, dynamic board that will ultimately move us forward.”

The mission was redefined with the idea that the Beckmann Theatre requires a niche in the artistic community. As an experienced fund-raiser, Alvarez knows what the philanthropic community looks for “Why would people support us?,” he said, pointing out that the answer to that question lies within the niche the Beckmann Theatre has been carving out. “We want to capitalize on not having a home.” “Theatre Wherever You Are,” he said, has a double meaning, both geographic and personal.

The tactic also allows for the Beckmann Theatre to operate on a lean budget, with the only significant expense being a production budget. The productions will continue to move about the community – to community centers, libraries, the Artsgarden. The goal remains to sustain and nurture new artists, to create another resource for artists to make a living.

Alvarez believes Bob Beckmann would wholeheartedly approve. “Bob was successful, but he believed in supporting everyday artists,” he said, adding that Beckmann also favored the smaller not-for-profits which didn’t land the major funders.

The goal of the revitalized Beckmann Theatre is to

The Beckmann Theatre’s next project: ‘Kiritsis’

A SERIES OF BECKMANN THEATRE WORKSHOPS which begin in December will be used to develop a new play by former Indiana playwright David Schanker, with the finished product to be presented in the spring of 2008.

“Kiritsis” is based on one of the most notorious events in Indianapolis history – the February 1977 abduction by would-be real estate developer Anthony Kiritsis of the mortgage broker who foreclosed on the 17-acre property where Kiritsis hoped to build a strip mall.

Kiritsis paraded his hostage through downtown Indianapolis with a sawed-off shotgun wired to his head, then held him at gunpoint in his apartment for three days, all the while venting his frustration on live radio and ultimately in an obscenity-laced rant on live television.

Schanker’s new play will be developed in a series of workshops at which the audience will provide feedback, then have the opportunity to see how the play changes in response to the feedback.

The first workshop will be at 2 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 9, at the Bona Thompson Memorial Center in Irvington. Admission is free, but a donation is requested. Those who participate in all the workshops will be granted free admission to an opening night reception.

“The purpose of the workshops is to hone the play, to tweak it, to get audience feedback for both the playwright and the director,” said director Rockland Brooks Mers. The playwright will be at the Dec. 9 workshop, which will be a first reading of the play. “We will be listening to the words,” said director Mers.

Board President Tom Alvarez said, “‘Kiritsis’ fits right into the Beckmann’s mission. We have spent the past year consolidating our resources in order to strengthen both the organization and our financial status. We look forward to building on our past successes and continuing the artistic innovation and excellence our audiences have come to expect of us.”

Schanker’s play, “Asylum,” was staged by the Beckmann Theatre in 2005. ■

mount one main production a year, potentially in site-specific locations which fit in the same way Central State Hospital fit “Asylum.” Meanwhile, the Beckmann’s “Second Stage” focuses on readings and workshops in a way which helps educate audiences on the playwriting process.

Alvarez sees the immediate goal is one of branding,

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making the Beckmann Theatre name more recognizable throughout the city. If successful, he said, the audiences will find the productions wherever they are. The Beckmann Theatre will become a destination.

“I see this as a way of sustaining and honoring Bob’s legacy,” Alvarez said, once again making the point that the Beckmann Theatre should be true to its namesake. “Bob

made things happen,” he said, emphasizing that Bob Beckmann was not only artistic but also professionally successful. “He had great style and taste. And what a visionary.”

Alvarez knew Bob Beckmann well enough to know something else. “Bob would love it,” he said of the theater. “Still getting all this attention.”

ABOUT THE BECKMANN THEATRE

Who was Bob Beckmann?

Robert D. Beckmann Jr. was an actor, photographer, arts patron and civic leader who, Alvarez said, understood that live theater is more than entertainment, that it is the core of a rich cultural experience. Said Beckmann himself, “I dream of a city where the arts are central, not peripheral; essential, not optional – a city where the arts are not merely icing on the cake, but truly the critical leavening in the cake itself.”

Among his many stage roles were Professor Marvel and the Wizard in the Civic Theatre’s “The Wizard of Oz” and Pappy Yokum in Footlite Theatre’s “Li’l Abner.”

Among his many achievements, Beckmann was the founding president of the Arts Council of Indianapolis. As a commercial realtor, he was a driving force in the development of Massachusetts Avenue as a home for galleries and theaters, and himself resided along Mass Ave. He was an officer or director of a number of civic organizations, including the Riley Area Development Corp., the Old Northside Association and Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana.

His role in the development of Mass Ave is honored by the fact that Riley Area’s annual achievement award is named in his honor.

Main productions

□ In 2004, David Mamet’s “American Buffalo” was performed on the Phoenix Theatre’s second stage.

□ In 2005, the Beckmann Theatre hosted the world premiere of local playwright David Schanker’s “Asylum” in the Laundry Building on the grounds of the former Central State Hospital – a fitting setting since the play deals with the final days of the mental institution.

□ In 2006, Jan Donley’s “Give the Dog a Bone” was performed at American Cabaret Theatre.

Second Stage

□ In 2002, a reading of Rita Kohn’s “Random Access” was performed at the Pike Performing Arts Center.

□ In 2004, readings included Claude McNeal’s “sensual excuses” at the Indianapolis Art Center and John M. Grudzien’s “In the Rain” at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

□ In 2006, Rita Kohn’s “Rivers, Roads and Rails” premiered at the Haughville Library and was repeated in the Bona Thompson Center in Irvington. That work was based on written and oral histories of the settlement of three neighborhoods on the city’s Westside.

□ In 2007 and 2008, Alvarez produced Cabaret Fest, a fund-raiser featuring many of the city’s most talented vocalists in performances which also served to showcase those singers’ talents to the city.

Board of Directors

Tom Alvarez, president
Maria Matters, vice-president
Kerrie Best, treasurer
Marion Garmel, secretary/archivist
Linda Charbonneau, Larry Jones, Kathy Jordan, David Heger,
Ellen Lee, Tina Mahern, Phil Parnell, Dave Ruark, John Schultz and Jim Strain.

Theater staff

Rockland Mers, artistic director
Maria Matters, managing director
Rita Kohn and Marion Garmel, Second Stage co-directors ■