



At long last, a place to call home

By Tom Dalton
Staff writer

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The Salem Theatre Company has been looking for a home virtually since its founding in 2002.

It has been seriously looking for a couple of years. The search grew almost desperate last fall when Executive Director Gary LaParl couldn't find any place in Salem to stage next year's plays — not a meeting room, not even a church basement. It got so bad that he considered taking the whole season on the road to Marblehead and Lynn.

"Gary came to me and said, 'I can't do this anymore. I'm just exhausted by looking,'" said John Fogle, the theater's artistic director.

The search, and anxiety, ended last Wednesday night when the Salem Theatre Co. board of directors signed a two-year lease for 90 Lafayette St., a former auto repair business that once housed Dracula's Castle, a haunted house.

The space is small, but big enough for the planned 60-seat theater.

The location, they say, has many assets. It is in the downtown, on a busy thoroughfare, and in a building that seems almost made for theater. It has high ceilings and good acoustics, is handicapped-accessible, comes with working bathrooms and will require only minimal renovations — a small stage, risers for seating and a box office.

After 22 plays and more than 40 small productions at countless venues, the Salem Theater Co. is happy to be home.

"Salem is the place we want to be," Fogle said Monday as he stood in the center of the empty, first-floor storefront. "This is the place we feel can support a regional theater."

The arrival of a small theater company may not be major news, like the Peabody Essex Museum expansion, but it is one of those little pieces that supporters, and local officials, feel will make a difference.

"I think Salem is ready for this," said Patricia Zaido, executive director of the Salem Partnership, who recalled the Barton Square Theater's attempt to establish a foothold in the downtown about two decades ago.

"Salem didn't have the renaissance then that it has now," she said. "It's very exciting."

Having a permanent home will help the Salem Theatre Co. expand its customer base and establish relationships with other downtown businesses, said Rinus Oosthoek, executive director of the Salem Chamber of Commerce.

"I saw the proposal a couple of weeks ago, and it just sounded right," he said.

The Salem Theatre Co. is in good financial shape, according to Dominick Pangallo, a director and longtime member. It will finish the current season with a balanced budget and will soon announce a \$50,000 capital campaign to cover renovations and to establish an endowment. The names of donors who contribute \$100 or more will appear on a plaque in the lobby.

The Salem Theatre Co. had been part of the arts group interested in the former St. Mary's Italian Church, but this opportunity was hard to pass up.

"That's a long-range effort," Fogle said, "and we had a shorter-range need."

The new theater is being designed by Marblehead architect Bruce Greenwald in collaboration with Fogle and Ryan Robbins, a sound and lighting designer from Salem. They hope to have it ready by February, when the black comedy "Loot" is scheduled to open.

There is talk of partnerships with other groups, such as the public schools and Rebel Shakespeare, a children's theater. They hope the Salem Film Festival will be able to hold some of its programs here in February and March, and that it will become a popular spot for local musicians to play.

They are also planning educational programs and speaker and artist series to make the theater busy right through the year.

Best of all, once the theater is up and running, they can concentrate on their primary task and won't have to expend energy and funds searching for places to hold a play, or spend days rigging lighting and putting up temporary staging.

"Now, with this space, we can put all our energy into growing our (theater) and developing our audience, all the things we should be doing, and that's exciting to us," LaParl said.

They still plan to stage "Hair" at the Marblehead Little Theatre next spring and may continue to use outside stages for larger productions. But this is home now, and they intend to perform at least three plays a year at 90 Lafayette St.

"We might do a lot more," Fogle said.

Salem Theatre Co.'s past venues (2002-2009)

Since its founding in 2002, the Salem Theatre Co. has bounced from church basements to school halls throughout the city, including:

The Salem Athenaeum, 337 Essex St.

Bates School

203 Essex St. storefront (now site of The True Story of Lizzie Borden)

Morse Auditorium at the Peabody Essex Museum

Colonial Hall (Daniel Lowe Building)

Old Town Hall

The Griffen Theatre, 7 Lynde St.

The First Church in Salem, Unitarian, 316 Essex St.

St. Peter's Episcopal Church, 24 St. Peter St.

Derby Square (outdoors)

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Photos



An artist's rendering shows the theater's new facade. Courtesy illustration



John Fogle, artistic director for the Salem Theatre Company, stands in the theater's new home where the stage will be, as shown in this diagram on a computer. The company has signed a two-year lease for 90 Lafayette St. Staff Photographer