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Talking Horse Productions finds a new home

Look for a hobo and a hooker at Talking Horse's opening night

By CONNOR RELYEA

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Amid stacked chairs, empty tables and unused light fixtures, the cast of *The Man with the Plastic Sandwich* rehearses scenes from the comedy and uses the cramped space as much as possible. The five-person cast of the four-character play will be the first group to perform in the new Talking Horse Productions theater on St. James Street after relocating from Berlin Theatre on North Tenth Street on July 13.

Talking Horse was founded in January 2012 by Ed Hanson, who serves as the company's artistic director. The company has since used the space at the Berlin Theatre for its performances, but when the owners of Café Berlin decided to expand, Hanson jumped at an offer of a new space.

"I had seen the limitations of working in the Berlin Theatre," Hanson says, "so when I saw this new space, I knew that this was going to be an opportunity to take Talking Horse in the right direction."

The Man with the Plastic Sandwich, written by Roger Karshner, will be the inaugural play at the new theater space. It tells the story of Walter Price, who has lost his job after 20 years of working for the same company. The play follows Walter over the course of three days as he contemplates his life on a park bench. While he sits, he meets the naive Ellie, the wise vagabond Haley, and Lenore, a straight-talking hooker.

The comedy will not only be the first show at the new theater but also DeeDee Folkerts' directorial debut. Staying true to form, Folkerts has envisioned the play to fit into the time and place that it was originally set — 1980s California. Folkerts and the cast have been hunting for costume pieces and wigs that would fit into the period. Folkerts is even planning on using music to help represent the three strangers Walter meets. "It's been interesting to look at the themes and each character and find songs from that time period that represent them," she says.

The show is intimate with minimal set design, a small cast and the crux of the action revolving around the relationships among the characters onstage. In the final act, Lenore runs to the park and begs Walter to help her out of a pickle she's in. Kirsten Malinee and Jacquelyn O'Brien alternate portraying Lenore as someone who knows how people operate.

When Malinee steps into Lenore's shoes, she begins to work on Walter and chips away at his self-involvement. In her extensive monologue, Lenore gives Walter a wake-up call. "She represents reality without all the emotional junk that we attach to who we should be," Malinee says. "She's very practical."

Walter squirms in his green plaid jacket when he discovers that Lenore is a prostitute. For Mark Baumgartner, who plays the lead character Walter, the reactions to the other characters have been his focus. "I know who Walter is," he says. "I've been trying to figure out how Walter is going to react to (the others)."

The show will be his first in 20 years, and Baumgartner says he feels a really strong sense of responsibility performing the lead role during the inaugural show.

In order to build relationships, Folkerts encouraged the actors to get rid of their scripts as soon as possible. This allows the actors to engage with one another during scenes and not be so caught up with their lines. “The magic only starts happening once the script is out of your hands,” Folkerts says.

With such a small script and setting, Folkerts has had to face the challenges of engaging the audience. Most of the play is dialogue between characters interacting on Walter’s bench. “When all you have is two actors, a bench, a trash can and maybe a tree, you have to think of ways to continually make it visually interesting,” she says.

Folkerts has implemented movement and blocking throughout the scenes and worked hard with the actors to make the actions purposeful. Actors have impulses to move the way a character would while onstage, which lends an unrehearsed quality to the moves. Folkerts has utilized this natural stage movement and apply it to the scenes presented.

One of the main challenges the cast and crew face is preparing the new theater for opening night tonight. The show will run until Aug. 18 and again from Aug. 22 to 25. For Talking Horse Productions, the new space comes with opportunities, including a larger light grid, more room for a moveable stage and several more seats for the audience. Hanson and volunteers have been working to paint the theater black and prepare the stage. “To convert the space from a warehouse to a black box theater is exciting work,” Hanson says.

Folkerts watches the scene between Lenore and Walter rehearsed atop a newly built stage. Occasionally, she stops the scene to tweak a line or ask a question about a character. She tries to be the director she would want were she the one onstage.

“As an actor, I’ve been asked several times, ‘Why do you do this?’” Folkerts says. “I do it because it’s a challenge. But honest to goodness, the reason I do what I do as an actor and now as a director is I just want to entertain people.”