However, many of the theatre's new properties have been workshoped out of town—at the Sundance Institute, for example, or Vassar’s Powerhouse Theater—before opening in Berkeley. “We’ve been feeling stretched and spread out, and have felt a strong need to localize ourselves.”

Doing more of this work in their own backyard doesn’t just make practical sense, Oldham says: “There’s something about the area we live in—it’s so generative and creative, and we want to be part of that. We want to explore the energy of where we are—not to sound too ‘Berkeley’ about it.”

The need for a place to develop new work here is the same as it is most places around the country. As Oldham puts it, “The regional theatre system is really good at putting on a play that’s already written—that’s how the systems were set up. But when you get something new, or you get something from other disciplines, it takes more time and space than the normal rehearsal process. Like with this puppet project we did recently—Lemony Snicket’s The Composer Is Dead—those puppets took a long time to build!”

The new program won’t put an end to out-of-town playmaking, notes Meghan Pressman, Berkeley Rep’s associate managing director and managing director of the Ground Floor: “The Ground Floor is not a place but a program.”

Agrees Oldham: “Oh, yeah, we’re still going to do things other places. But instead of a 90/10 ratio, it’ll be more like 50/50.”

The Ground Floor pieces together a million-dollar grant from the James Irvine Foundation for its first summer session, a $750,000 grant from ArtPlace to support its physical plant, and a Mellon grant for a workshop and commissioning component.

One project they’re eying, Oldham divulges, is a food-focused work, tentatively titled The California Project, inspired by the Tri-Cycle Theatre’s ambitious, multi-part look at Afghanistan, The Great Game, which came to Berkeley Rep in 2010. “At some point we’d also like to do something about immigration,” Oldham mentions. At least now Berkeley Rep staffers won’t have to be migrant workers themselves. Go to www.berkeleyrep.org/about/groundfloor.asp.

**Bringing It All Back Home**

**BERKELEY, CALIF:** “We kind of got tired of going other places to develop work,” says Madeleine Oldham, dramaturg for Berkeley Repertory Theatre and the director of the theatre’s newest initiative, a new-works development program called the Ground Floor, to be centered in the company’s 62,000-square-foot West Berkeley building, purchased in late 2010. Oldham points to Passing Strange, American Idiot and In the Next Room, or the vibrator play (all three of which eventually had Broadway runs) as examples of Berkeley Rep’s new-work development.