Now the Playwrights and Artists Can Come Here

BY REYHAN HARMANCı

Walking into Berkeley Repertory Theater’s rehearsal and office complex, on a nondescript street in West Berkeley, felt very different from the Klieg lights of the company’s downtown performance space.

The entrance to this 62,000-square-foot complex showed off a light-filled and spacious but unfinished main building. Tape outlined a square in a wall facing the door, furniture only half-filled some conference rooms, and the kitchen was devoid of appliances.

While many local theater companies have been forced to scale back because of economic pressures, Berkeley Rep is expanding. The new space will house the Ground Floor, an ambitious new project that aims to transform this 44-year-old theater company’s new works program into an “R&D facility” and “an incubator for theatrical start-ups.”

“We take very seriously that we’re in the Bay Area, and we want to have some sort of synergy between us and that feeling of innovating, of pioneering that is Silicon Valley,” said Madeleine Oldham, the project’s energetic, tattooed artistic director.

Ground Floor’s first initiative is the forthcoming Summer Lab. Beginning in July, Berkeley Rep will host more than 75 artists, playwrights, actors and musicians at the new site—a month of communal dinners, workshops, rehearsals and experimentation, with overlapping residencies intended to encourage as much collaboration as possible.

Some, like Daniel LeFranc, whose play “The Troublemaker, or The Freakin’ Kick-A Adventures of Bradley Boatright” is slated for the stage this fall, will be working alongside already commissioned works alongside artists with projects in earlier stages of development. More than 200 proposals vied for spots in the program. And a group of 20 writers, including Danny Hoch and Lynn Nottage, will be on hand for a four-day intensive residency. “We’re envisioning the Ground Floor as the umbrella for all of our new work activity,” said Ms. Oldham. “The Summer Lab is the sexy, big cornerstone, but year round, there will still be workshops happening.”

For audiences, who enjoy 9 to 10 plays every season on Berkeley Repertory’s two downtown stages, the change will not be radical. The company has built a national reputation by helping develop work like “Passing Strange” and “American Idiot” as well as presenting marquee performers like Mikhail Baryshnikov. He will appear in a play, “In Paris,” starting April 25.

But for the artists who work with the company, the Ground Floor represents a sea change. Instead of Berkeley Rep staff members traveling to work with artists on commissioned works, Berkeley will become a self-contained hub of activity with housing, rehearsal spaces, even costing on site. There will be more opportunities for both the staff and the public to see plays in progress, and Ms. Oldham plans to overhaul the new works program’s Web presence.

“We didn’t like that so much of our development work has been happening other places,” Ms. Oldham said.

“And some ways, undercover,” said Meghan Pressman, associate managing director.

Berkeley Rep certainly is not the only local organization throwing around tech-infused terms. San Francisco’s Intersection for the Arts now operates out of the Hub, a technology and art space in downtown San Francisco, and has loudly championed its work with entrepreneurs of all stripes. But Berkeley Rep’s new project is unusually large.

“We haven’t been able to approach it that expansively before, to think of it as an incubator for risk-taking,” Ms. Oldham said.

For many playwrights, the chance to collaborate with artists in the Berkeley Rep complex was extremely enticing.

“You don’t always get the opportunity to have workshops on something that is not necessarily a commissioned project,” said Heidi Stillman, a Chicago playwright and artistic director of new work at the Lookingglass Theater Company. She arrives in July to work on a piece inspired by Marguerite Duras.

“It’s exciting to see what happens with the cross-pollination, being there with the other artists,” Ms. Stillman said, adding that while other summer programs, like Sundance Institute’s theater lab, exist, Berkeley Rep is refreshing “artist-focused.”

Many details about the Ground Floor are yet to be worked out, particularly how technology will mix with Berkeley Rep. Ms. Oldham said she wanted to find new ways of using technology to represent the work they do and introduce audiences to new playwrights. That will mean using social media not just as a marketing device but as a way to communicate about how Berkeley does what it does so well — produce experimental new theater. But both Ms. Oldham and Ms. Pressman were surprised by many of the ideas they had seen so far by other theater companies — for instance, creating a section for people who want to send Twitter messages during a performance or just start filming performances for online audiences.

“My goal for myself is to make the Web content as creative as the work that we do onstage,” Ms. Oldham said. “A lot of people put a camera on an artist and they just talk at it, and it’s not actually very interesting. I’m hopeful that we can create something that is reflective of what these people are doing.”

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