

CASE STATEMENT

How do you fit 150 theater companies into 10 theater venues? The answer is, you don’t. But it’s a trick question.

The need for theater space in Portland is real. There are almost 100 theater companies and fewer than ten real theater venues in Portland, and some of those don’t rent to other companies. Now, we’ve all done shows in the basement of a pizza parlor or in the backroom of a book store, but we need real, grown-up theater space - with lights and sound, dressing rooms and bathrooms, seats and a lobby. You might be laughing, but these are things that companies will do without to get a show produced.

The closing of Theater!Theatre! in June 2013, was devastating to not only the companies left without a home, but to the entire community. There were 12 theater companies that used Theater!Theatre! on a regular basis (including 24 Hour Plays, Action/Adventure Theatre, Beat BangerZ, Black Tie Comedy Troupe, Classic Greek Theatre, CoToP Theatre, Curious Comedy, Dance Naked Productions, Fantastic Umbrella Factory, Fuse Theatre Ensemble, Hoofers & Co., JANE a theater company, Jewish Theatre Collaborative, La Bodega Productions, Lights Up! Productions, Miss Bee Haven, Inc., Nomadic Theatre Co., Northwest Classical Theatre Co., Playback Theater, Portland Theatre Works, Profile, PSU TASO, Public Playhouse, Pyrogen Productions, Renob Control, Sowelu, Staged!, Stumptown Stages, The Phoenix Theatre Co., Theatre Vertigo, Traveling Lantern, Twilight Repertory Theatre, PlayWrite, Inc., The Attic Institute, US Jesco, and over two dozen teachers and individual artists). And the businesses in the neighborhood are frightened as to how the closure will affect them because a theater is more than just a place to see a show. It brings people together – they have dinner before the show, dessert, maybe drinks after the show. During rehearsals the cast and crew get food and supplies at the neighborhood businesses. I swear that whenever I did a show at Theater!Theatre! I kept Zupan’s in business all by myself.

The day I heard Theater!Theatre! was closing, I was driving home, down 84, and I saw a “For Sale” sign on a building. On a whim, I went and looked. The building is nearly perfect for a new theater venue. It is 10,000 square feet (100 x 100), cement cinder block tilt-up construction with almost 30 foot ceilings. The business across the street has a big parking lot and they have said we can use the lot outside of their business hours. Tri-Met and MAX are ½ block away. It’s right on the freeway(10 minutes from downtown). There are small business districts 2 blocks on either side of the site with coffee shops, restaurants and pubs. And even with the freeway and MAX directly behind the building, because they are below street level the sound funnels up and you can’t hear a thing in the building – soundproof! We have had several conversations with the current owner of the building and he wants us to be the ones to purchase the building, and is willing to give us some time at the point of making a down payment to making the full purchase. After we raise the money to purchase the building the current owner/tenant will rent the space back from us for eight months (that is more income for us) - he wants time to relocate, and that gives us time to raise the money to rehab.

JANE was founded in 2008 and we loved our cozy little home at Theater!Theatre!. We were actually scheduled to be the next show at Theater!Theatre! at the closing date. We canceled that show and went on the search for a venue to do our annual family show The HULLABALOO!. That gave us four months to secure a venue. Most venues schedule one to two years in advance. We had four months. A week before we were scheduled to start rehearsals I signed an agreement with La Salle High School to use their auditorium for two weeks (we usually do a 4 week run) over their Christmas break. I also worked out a rehearsal schedule with the head of the Drama department. We were on our way! The afternoon of the day we were to start rehearsal the facilities manager contacted me and said they couldn’t accommodate our rehearsal schedule and we needed to find someplace else to rehearse. Four hours before rehearsal was to start (that pesky “four” number keeps cropping up!). We canceled rehearsal for that night and spent the next 24 hours finding a place to hold our first read through. Then we spent the next 24 hours finding a place to hold the rest of our rehearsals. We did finally find a place – it was a great deal but the room was only 8’x12’. The stage we would be working on was 15’x 30’. It was hard to stage and rehearse in a space so much smaller than the venue.

The new venue would have two performance spaces, a smaller (flexible 50 seat) studio space, and a larger (100-150 seat) traditional proscenium space. Each performance space would have a dedicated rehearsal room. There would be a separate classroom. Several offices would be available for resident companies to rent and of course, lobby, restrooms, dressing rooms, a scene shop and a costume shop (the last two of which are nearly unheard of in most venues!). AND the scene shop and both stages would be at street level for ease of load in and set building.

There are two reasons we want to buy and own the building.

1. If we own the building we can keep the rents as low as possible. That way smaller companies can stay in business. This is not a money making venture for my company, JANE. We want the rents to cover utilities, and to manage and maintain the building. And the theater will always be a theater.
2. If we own the building it can never be turned into a tea warehouse. We can avoid the whole Theater!Theatre! tragedy. (That’s not to say we don’t understand why Varindeer Chawla didn’t renew the lease on Theater!Theatre! He is a small business owner and needs to do what is right for his business. But it was, nonetheless, a blow to the theater community.)

We have been talking with the owner of the building for several months and he is very enthusiastic about this project. We are his choice to purchase the building. We’ve had a seismic assessment done. We have a preliminary floor plan. After raising the money we will purchase the building, raise the money to rehab the building, outfit the spaces, then performances begin!

I jumped into this project because I believe in it with my whole heart and soul. I truly believe this space is vital to JANE, the companies displaced by the closure of Theater!Theatre!, and other small companies that are doing their best to survive while dancing from venue to venue. It is impossible to acquire, maintain and grow an audience and donor base if you are peripatetic. This new venue will give several companies the chance to grow and thrive, not to mention the collaboration opportunities and audience cross-over.

The JANE board and I decided we would be glad to take on the risk and responsibility of this project, and the venue when it is up and running. I have 10 years of experience in Commercial Property Management which included rehabbing buildings.

I talked with Sharon Maroney of Broadway Rose, about their recent theater rehab, and she emphasized how hellish the rehab process was for her. It took her a year to recover. But I know how to do this. I’ve done it. I am uniquely qualified to take on this project. I have rehabbed and managed commercial buildings. That’s not hell to me. That’s a day.

So far we have *Letters of Intent* from these companies:

 **Theatre Vertigo**

 **BadAss**

 **PassinArt**

 **Happy Improv Fun Time**

I believe we can accommodate 6 resident companies (including JANE), and also several one-offs each year. We also have film makers and musical groups interested.

We have a couple of acting teachers that want to use the classroom space on a regular basis.

And people have expressed interest in renting office space as well.

JANE will also be taking Portland Theater Brigade under our wing. Brigade is an acting program for young people. They will be holding classes in the classroom and performances on one of the stages (as well as performing in schools reaching over 5000 students a year.)

Another revenue stream is the building itself. Because the back wall of the building is on the freeway, there is a billboard company that wants to rent the wall (somewhere between 3k and 5k a month). SCORE!

As former Creative Director for IFCC, my fellow board member Adrienne Flagg experienced more applicants for IFCC’s performance season that they could accommodate and had an extensive wait list for short term users as well. Portland Area Theatre Alliance recognizes 150 theater producing entities, there are over 30 different improvisational groups, and numerous unhoused dance and performance arts groups and individuals. All vying for the same 10 theater venues. I know that we will not have a problem filling the space with companies that will bring their unique audience, who in turn will support other local businesses and bring positive evening foot traffic to an underserved neighborhood.

This project is a win for JANE, the theater community and Portland.