

**Palo
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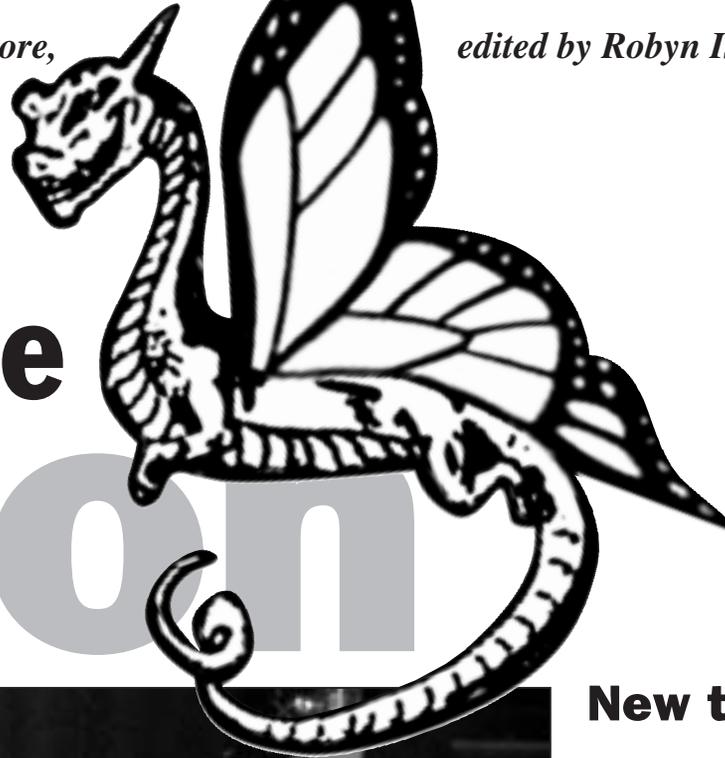
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Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more,

edited by Robyn Israel



Home of the Dragon



New theater company seeks space in downtown Palo Alto

by Robyn Israel

If you walk along the 100 block of University Avenue, you will pass places like Blockbuster Video, Miyake, E-Trade and the Elbe.

Early next year, on that same block, passersby may also discover live theater performed in the intimacy of a basement space. If all goes according to plan, people strolling down University Avenue will get the chance to see "The Heidi Chronicles," Wendy Wasserstein's Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning play, in a 50-seat black-box theatre.

That is the dream of Meredith Hagedorn, the founder of local theater company Dragon Productions, which is currently staging "No Exit" (see sidebar) at the Pear Avenue Theatre.

"Our goal has always been to provide quality professional theater, producing rarely seen works in an intimate space," Hagedorn said.

The Palo Alto resident envisions a bright future for her 5-year-old company, which has previously had to rent space in a variety of venues. Her goal, beginning in 2006, is to operate a five-show season in a permanent space in downtown Palo Alto. To accomplish that objective, the company is launching a huge fund-raising campaign, with the goal of raising \$120,000 — \$50,000 by this July.

Hagedorn has already found a basement property that would provide both rehearsal and performance spaces, as well as a cafe for after-theater munching. It is just the kind of gathering place Palo Alto does not have, Hagedorn said, adding she would love to fill that void — so much so she recently quit her day job in order to concentrate full-time on this dream.

"It's much cheaper below-ground. That's what made me think this dream could be a reality.

"And there's a wealth of community that comes to downtown Palo Alto. There's more than 40 restaurants in a five-block radius, so there's all these people coming downtown and

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Director Jane Bement Geesman (left) and Dragon Productions founder Meredith Hagedorn, photographed at the Pear Avenue Theatre. Both are involved in Dragon's latest offering, "No Exit."



Kevin Hagen



Kevin Hagen

Arts

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looking for things to do. There's the Stanford Theatre — which fills its niche — and the Aquarius Theatre, which fills its niche. And then there's nothing else."

Hagedorn's dream is to turn Dragon's performance space into another Steppenwolf Theatre, referring to the Chicago-based theatre founded by Gary Sinise and John Malkovich.

"It started in a church basement, but grew into a high-budget theatre. And it's a real actors' theatre. Not high-spectacle, but high-quality work."

That certainly appeals to director Jane Bement Geesman, who has directed plays for Dragon Productions ("No Exit," "Assorted Flavors" and "Collected Stories") and Palo Alto Players ("Anton in Show Business," "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat").

"As a member of the theater community, I love the idea of a venue that's right here in my own community, where my fellow actors/directors and I can work," Geesman said. "And having worked with Dragon Productions on three different — and successful — productions now, there's no doubt in my mind that Palo Alto, its residents and its busi-

ness owners, would be enriched by a locally-based theatre company."

Like Steppenwolf, Dragon aims to produce dramatic plays, rather than musicals.

"They're very expensive to produce. Just hiring an accompanist is expensive, not to mention royalties. I'm not totally against musicals — I'd love to put on 'I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change' — but I want to stay away from the big Broadway production musicals. That's not what we're about. You can't do a Broadway show in a black-box theatre."

When Hagedorn, a member of Actor's Equity Association, first moved from L.A. to the Bay Area six years ago, she struggled to find work. She auditioned for TheatreWorks many times but failed to get cast.

"It's next to impossible to get in if you're not already in. It's very cliquey. And the major roles typically go to (actors in) New York and L.A. And if they can find a good non-union actor to fill a role they will."

So she founded Dragon Productions to create opportunities for her, as well as other local actors.

"There's just not enough equity work in the Bay Area, and the equity houses that are hiring are doing musicals. It's very hard. I want to

Actors Shannon Stowe (left) and Meredith Hagedorn are currently appearing in "No Exit" at the Pear Avenue Theatre (above) in Mountain View.

pay everyone who's involved in Dragon Productions, so I'm interested in equity contracts."

To do that, Hagedorn said she cannot rely solely on filling a black-box theatre.

"A theatre like this will rely on corporate sponsorships, grants and individual donations. It won't stay alive on ticket sales. There's only so much we can make on each production. Even if I sold out every show I couldn't do it. And I want to keep ticket costs low, so the masses can come."

Dragon's track record bodes well for accomplishing Hagedorn's dream — she has made a profit on all seven productions. Keeping operation costs low has helped, of course.

"We made a meeting room at the Palo Alto Art Center into a theater. The set was very bare-bones. This show literally lived in my car, since we didn't have any storage space in the Center. We set it up and tore it

down every night. It was the cheapest show I've ever done."

Dragon's next production: "Cloud Nine" by Carol Churchill, will open in the fall. Filled with characters who are gays, lesbians and transsexuals, it's edgy fare — and clearly not the typical Palo Alto show.

"I love to produce shows that scare the hell out of me, and this one does for many reasons," Hagedorn said. "It's a risky play and a lot of people may frown on it. But we're out there pushing the envelope. I'm trying to reach out to the younger generation. I want to show them it's exciting, that it's not just for old people. Of course we don't want to alienate them; they're the ones who are coming, who are donating money." ■

WHAT: Jean-Paul Sartre's "No Exit," presented by Dragon Productions

WHERE: Pear Avenue Theatre, 1220 Pear Ave., Unit K in Mountain View

WHEN: Tonight and Saturday at 8 p.m.; Sunday at 2 p.m.

COST: Tickets are \$15 general admission; \$10 students and seniors.

INFO: For reservations please call (650) 493-2006 or purchase online at www.dragonproductions.net.



About the cover: Director Jane Bement Geesman and actress/Dragon Productions founder Meredith Hagedorn, photographed at the Pear Avenue Theatre in Mountain View.

Hell is other people

Why Sartre's 'No Exit' appeals to Dragon Productions

by Robyn Israel

"No Exit" is exactly the kind of play that Dragon Productions loves to stage.

"That play fits into the off-the-beaten-path works I like to produce," company founder Meredith Hagedorn said. "It's a classic that's rarely seen, and that's one of the reasons it was on my list. I don't want to do 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat.' I want to do rarely produced works that have good writing, solid yet flawed characters and challenging storylines."

Considered by many to be philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's best play, the story centers on one man and two women in a relatively bare room — from which there is no escape. The play is studied often by actors yet rarely produced today.

"I read it in grad school," director Jane Bement Geesman said. "I

loved it because of the existential questions it asks, because of the intense dynamics of the three characters and because it takes place in hell, or at least Sartre's idea of hell."

Sartre wrote the original draft (titled "Huit Clos") in two weeks at the Cafe Flore in Paris. At the time, the city was occupied by Nazi Germany. He deliberately wrote it as a one-act play, so that theater-goers would not be kept past the Nazi-imposed curfew.

"No Exit" opened in the spring of 1944 and was an immediate success. The original production played in Paris for several years, even after the war ended. Parisian audiences appreciated Sartre's subtle message of resistance and subversiveness.

"No Exit" was translated into English and made its Broadway debut in 1947. ■



(l-r) Shannon Stowe, John Byrd and Meredith Hagedorn co-star in "No Exit" at the Pear Avenue Theatre. The production is presented by Dragon Productions.