

On with the show

Despite financial concerns, Dragon Productions embarks on full second season in Palo Alto

by Rebecca Wallace

One of the 40 rose-cushioned seats in the Dragon Theatre in Palo Alto has a special plaque: "In loving memory of Jason Schoenagle." It honors a man who died of cancer, a close friend of Dragon founder Meredith Hagedorn.

"He had never gotten to see my theater, so I put him here," she says.

Poignancy mixes with quiet pride in her voice. The plaque is a memorial, and also a symbol of Hagedorn's achievement in opening a theater for her company. Actual plaques on actual seats, stage lights warm on your face: these are tangible pieces of a dream realized.

The plaques, though, also have a more pragmatic significance. With supporters paying \$300 for each one, the plaques represent money that the Dragon Productions Theatre Company certainly needs.

Hagedorn founded Dragon in 2000 and began putting on shows around the Bay Area. But the company remained nomadic until last year, when Dragon moved into a 2,500-square-foot space on Alma Street. Now the company is marking its first anniversary in its own lair, and recently launched its second season with a well-received production of Charlotte Jones' "Humble Boy."

This is also the year that Hagedorn, a Palo Alto resident, hopes Dragon will break even. To raise the money to build the black-box theater -- seats, bathrooms and all -- she pounded the pavement, seeking out grants, loans and donations. But these were hard to come by for a small, new company, and she had to borrow about \$100,000 on several credit cards to build the theater.

In the past year, ticket sales, donations and income from renting out the Dragon space (which includes a dance room) and offering classes there have meant paying down about half the debt, Hagedorn said.

And it's a busy year ahead: Dragon plans six more plays by November, from Neil Simon's "The Gingerbread Lady" to Michelle Lowe's black comedy "The Smell of the Kill." Despite the company's size, Hagedorn, an Equity actor, considers it "semi-professional." Actors and directors, for instance, all get paid stipends.

"We just want to keep building, to grow bigger and better," Hagedorn says, smiling as she points out the decorative lights she just put up in the pint-sized lobby's front window.

This may be a small touch, but she's hoping it will make Dragon more visible. With a new theater tucked behind a storefront window, there are still many people who don't know about it yet.

Of course, life can be trying for any arts group in this area. Costs are high (Dragon pays about \$5,000 a month in rent) and the oft-manic Silicon Valley lifestyle can leave people with no time to visit an exhibition or go to a play.

Even the local theater behemoth, TheatreWorks, faces those challenges, founding artistic director Robert Kelley says. Still, he said the start-up mentality here may draw people to Dragon. "There's that entrepreneurial spirit and admiration for things that are new and risk-taking," he said.

TheatreWorks, of course, started out small 37 years ago. Kelley well remembers being without a theater, performing at the Baylands and even in the parking lot under Palo Alto City Hall.

"You sat on the down ramp. Our seating has improved since then," he said, chuckling.

In contrast, Kelley thinks Dragon has a huge asset in its home base. The company also has an advantage that the new TheatreWorks didn't: the flood of people to the area in recent years.

"There's the influx of people from New York or Chicago; it helps to increase overall the number of people who already have theater in their blood," he said. "Also, the sophistication of our population has grown. That makes it somewhat fertile territory (for theater)."

Overall, Kelley says he has "tremendous admiration" for Dragon. "It seems to me they've had a very successful first year," he said. "There seems to be a genuine interest in seeing live theater in an intimate setting."

During Dragon's first home season, its six plays ran an intriguing gamut. This was a year that included both Steve Martin's comedy "The Underpants" and a heavy helping of Brecht with "The Caucasian Chalk Circle."

Ticket sales varied. "The Underpants," for instance, was a hit, while the Cindy Lou Johnson play "Brilliant Traces" didn't have the audiences Hagedorn had hoped for, although it was popular among the theater community, she said.

It all began with "The Heidi Chronicles," which opened last Feb. 23. Although the Wendy Wasserstein classic isn't a lesser-known play, as Dragon shows typically are, Hagedorn had wanted to do it for 15 years.

That first production, in which she starred as Heidi, was both "unbelievable" and "terrifying," she said. Actors rehearsed in the midst of construction as the new theater was being built.

"There was a lot of sawdust. We had a few rehearsals without electricity," Hagedorn said.

At 4 p.m. on opening night, the fire marshal and the contractor were still there looking around.

"They did give us a permit, and let us open," Hagedorn said, shaking her head. "It was an amazing feeling -- finally opening!"

Oh, and there was one more little thing that happened last year: Hagedorn got married, to James Kasyan. "We got engaged in December '05. We decided, 'Why not do everything this year?'"

The couple held their wedding reception -- where else? -- in the theater. Ron Gasparinetti, a frequent scenic designer for Dragon,



decked it out as a romantic reception hall.

In lieu of wedding gifts, the couple asked for donations to Dragon. "It brought in \$12,000," Hagedorn said, grinning.

That's clearly not a fundraising event one can hold every year, so Hagedorn and a small core of supporters remain busy seeking income for the company. They hope that with the company maturing, it will be easier to win grants. This is key because ticket sales are not always high and enrollment has remained low in Dragon's classes, which include courses on improv and audition skills, Hagedorn said.

Mary Lou Torre, a regular Dragon actor and fundraiser, said she's planning a new fundraising event "that will allow the event patrons to perform in scenes from Dragon's season of plays."

Dragon also hopes to partner with downtown restaurants to create dinner/theater packages and bring in more theatergoers, Torre said.

From the business standpoint, Sandra Lonquist, president and CEO of the Palo Alto Chamber of Commerce, said she's thrilled to have Dragon here, and called Hagedorn "a savvy marketer."

"What I think a live theater can bring to downtown Palo Alto is humanity. It's interesting, it's unusual," she said.

There are ways to save money, too: Hagedorn looks favorably on scripts that need fewer actors and less elaborate props and sets.

She's also endeavoring to bring more folks into the "Dragon family," whether it's new directors helming shows, or more people selling tickets in the lobby (and seeing the show for free).

That family may be smaller than she'd like, but the people who are already fans of Dragon seem loyal.

Patron Edna Shochat praises Dragon shows as akin to the theater she missed from living in New York. She wrote an article in the company's newsletter after seeing the Donald Margulies drama "Collected Stories" in 2003, when Dragon performed at the Pear Avenue Theatre in Mountain View.

"It was a revelation: An original story on a timeless topic was brought vividly to life by two powerful characters," she wrote. "The play stayed with me and 'followed me home.'"

She concluded, "Who knew that right here, so close, there could be brilliant stars shining just as brightly."

Torre, too, has a dedication to Dragon -- that runs in the family. She and husband Rich bought three seat plaques in the theater: two for the couple, and one for Rich's service dog, Kovin.

"Kovin's plaque is actually on the ground rather than on a seat," she said. "Kovin sits near his plaque when he attends plays."

Info: The Dragon Theatre is at 535 Alma St. in Palo Alto. Its next production is "Maybe Baby, It's You" by Charlie Shalian and Shari Simpson, opening March 2. For information about ticketing or getting involved with Dragon, call 650-493-2006 or go to www.dragonproductions.net.



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