

Dragon, filled with fiery purpose, occupies theater district

Don't look now, but the self-proclaimed theater district in downtown Redwood City just got bigger, thanks to the new, 75-seat Dragon Theatre on Broadway, kitty-corner from the historic Fox Theatre. Until recently, the Dragon was located on Alma Street in Palo Alto, not far from University Avenue, but a big increase in rent sent founder and artistic director Meredith Hagedorn scouting for a new space.

"We loved our little (43-seat) theater," says Hagedorn, who took over the Palo Alto site in 2006. "But for the past few years, we definitely felt the need for more room, so this move is really a good thing."

The new space is larger by far (from 2,200 in Palo Alto to 4,850 square feet) with a stage that is 20-feet in diameter and has more backstage room. Even better, Dragon will have a dedicated rehearsal studio, a green room for actors with space for costumes, and a bathroom for cast members only. There's also a kitchenette, office space for Dragon's small staff, and, on a second level, an office for Hagedorn, a classroom/conference area, and a large storage area for costumes and props.

That second level also will have a distinctive mezzanine area with the best view of the stage. Hagedorn envisions putting a small couch there, with a comfortable chair and table. Naturally, theatergoers who opt for the cozy (it'll likely seat a maximum of four) mezzanine tickets will pay a premium price.

Hagedorn says the building once housed a

travel agency, but had been vacant for the past seven years. She worked closely with the Oakland architectural firm of Clad Studio to design the theater's interior, and she credits that company, and contractor Louis Paycheck of European Enterprises, for figuring out the best use of the available space.

Although the exterior of the building will retain much of the same look, the interior has undergone a complete makeover. All



the walls and doors are new, there's now a modern stairway with glass panels and metal railings; the mezzanine has moved; and theatergoers will now enter the theater via a stylish polished concrete floor in the lobby.

Bathrooms are usually scarce in small theaters, but Hagedorn says she was fortunate to work out an arrangement to share the large men's and women's bathrooms with Sakura, a Japanese restaurant located next door.

Hagedorn has a penchant for dragons (hence the theater's name), and for the color purple, so both are in evidence at the new Dragon Theatre. There are purple accent lights, a complete wall painted purple, and purple ceiling braces.

Because the stage itself is so wide, Hagedorn says all 70 of the theater's seats will be close to the stage and have good sight lines. She purchased 50 new seats for the theater, but also salvaged 20 of the seats from the previous space and moved them to Redwood City.

Due to the Christmas holidays and a long-anticipated vacation, Hagedorn says her staff and board members all had to pitch in to ensure that the new theater would be ready for the opening of the first production there, "After Ashley," on Jan. 25.

The play, written in 2004 by television and film writer Gina Gionfriddo ("Becky Shaw") has seldom, if ever, been performed in the Bay Area, according to Dale Albright, who originally recommended it to Hagedorn and is now directing it for Dragon's inaugural Redwood City production.

"When I first read the play, I liked it a lot, and when I read it a second time, I liked it even more. The first scene is just brilliant," says Hagedorn, who has the role of Ashley in this production.

Albright agrees. "I want to fall for a play in the first five pages," he says. "In 'After Ashley,' the character of Ashley is so unusual, such an imperfect person. Then, as the play continues, it takes these perceptions of her and turns them upside down. Pretty soon the audience realizes that their perceptions of Ashley are all wrong."

Although Albright says he was eager to direct this play, he has found a number of challenges due to the fact that the theater was still under construction during the weeks he was rehearsing his cast. "Because this is a new space with a different placement of the

stage, it's been both challenging and exciting. We have a really excellent cast, with actors who live all over the Bay Area. I think that's a definite advantage of being in Redwood City, because it is very accessible from San Francisco, the East Bay -- just about anywhere."

Albright, who works at Theatre Bay Area in San Francisco, says he appreciates Hagedorn's fervor and dedication to bringing quality theater to the Peninsula. He revealed that she is one of 25 people who have just been recognized by Theatre Bay Area as one of its Faces of 2013, for their contributions to Bay Area theater.

Hagedorn says she's appreciative that many of Dragon's season subscribers have supported the move by resubscribing this year.

"We also added some new subscribers who live in the Redwood City area. But I know the move's been bittersweet for some of our board members and subscribers. "I guess I'm more of a 'looking forward' kind of person. Our first theater was cute and functional, but this one feels a lot more grown-up to me. And it's certainly a lot more beautiful.

"Besides," she adds, "we've been doing about six plays a year in Palo Alto, yet it wasn't until we announced we were leaving that a lot of people stopped by and told us they never even knew we were there."

That's not likely to happen now -- the new Dragon Theatre has a brilliantly lit metal marquee above its doors and is smack in the middle of the bustling Redwood City nighttime scene.

Never one to shy away from challenges, Hagedorn and Dragon Theatre are in the midst of a \$400,000 relocation fundraising campaign. Thanks to matching grants and donations, the fund was over \$300,000 at press time, and Hagedorn says she has every faith that they'll achieve the goal.

That same "can do" spirit has enabled her to build a solid reputation both with actors and with theatergoers since she founded her own non-profit theater company in 2000.

"My goal has always been that when an actor comes to Dragon, he'll say, 'I had a great time working there.' I think we have a pretty good track record so far."

Email Joanne at joanneengelhardt@comcast.net.

THEATER

What: "After Ashley"

Where: Dragon Productions Theatre Company, 2120 Broadway, Redwood City

When: Jan. 25 through Feb. 17

Tickets: \$15-30 (\$5 more for opening night gala); 650-493-2006 or www.dragonproductions.net