

Chyro Brings Alternative to Scottsdale

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With five dozen or so companies producing plays in the Valley, there is more than enough competition for theatergoers' dollars. But there's something about the artistic impulse that insists there's always room for more.

With paintings on the walls and rows of comfy couches instead of chairs, Chyro Arts Venue would fit in perfectly with downtown Phoenix's First Fridays scene. But this theater startup is more out-of-the-ordinary at Scottsdale's Papago Plaza, at Scottsdale and McDowell roads.

"There just isn't anything like this in this area," says Tom Leveen, artistic director of the venue's resident Chyro's Voice Theatre (chyro.org).

"We're going after the people much like the people who go to central Phoenix, the people who either can't or won't spend \$40 for a ticket to see theater. (But) we're trying to make it something specific to south Scottsdale."

Leveen and most of his Chyro cohorts are alumni of Is What It Is Theatre, a grass-roots company that closed in 2006.

"It's everything we wanted Is What It Is to be, but we just didn't have the resources and the planetary alignment to make happen," Leveen says. "We had talked a lot about expanding the arts that we were able to offer people. We wanted to screen films, host bands, but of course we couldn't do that in a venue that wasn't our own. . . ."

"We've tried to create an atmosphere that people will want to hang out in."

Chyro launched its theater season in August with Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, followed by *Butterflies Are Free* and *Closer*, both familiar from their film versions (from 1972 and 2004, respectively); next up is the comedy *Catholic School Girls*. It's an eclectic mix, but all are plays that Leveen feels have something important to say. Which goes a long way toward explaining

why, after more than a decade of creating theater on a shoestring, he's willing to start all over again.

"It's totally a power trip," he says with a laugh, but he's only half-joking.

"A lot of it does have to do with being able to call the shots and say, 'This is the show we want to do, so we're going to do it.' "

Like Leveen, Arizona State University student John Caswell Jr. is following the siren call of artistic entrepreneurship. He founded Progressive Theatre Workshop (progressivetheatreworkshop.com) last year and plans to move into Chyro Arts Venue for his first full season in October, after graduating this spring.

Caswell's first production, titled *Shots: A Love Story*, was deeply personal. Inspired by his own battle with alcoholism, it avoided traditional narrative (i.e., a story with a beginning, middle and end) in favor of repeated dialogue and ritualized movement that captured the essence of an addict's downward spiral.

Progressive Theatre Workshop is reprising *Shots* next weekend at the Phoenix Fringe Festival. The event was organized by two more arts entrepreneurs, ASU grad students Jonathan Beller and Patrick Demers. Taking their cues from similarly named events in cities around the world, they hope to make it an annual affair here.

"We're looking for theater that pushes the boundaries, the conventional notion of what theater is," Beller says.

Caswell also has submitted *Shots* for the New York Fringe Festival. If accepted, he'll travel there in August before kicking off his first season with *Britney Spears for President*, a critique of America's cult of celebrity. (The title is tentative.)

"It's very non-linear," Caswell says. "It's almost like a visual essay or collage."

Like *Shots*, it is an example of "devised theater," developed in collaboration with actors rather than staged from a completed script.

"It's a whole bunch of ideas and images being pieced together. In the rehearsal process, we find ways to weave these individual pieces into a cohesive work."

While this kind of experimental theater is a long distance from Chyro's more traditional stage productions, the two companies have more in common than a building. Like Leveen, Caswell feels driven to fill what they see as a hole in the Valley's theater scene.

"I think it's really important to give people a taste of different genres and subgenres of art than they're used to," he says.

On an even more basic level, he adds, "It's a necessity for me. I don't feel fulfilled unless I'm doing the kind of work that we're aiming to do."

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