

# Bas Bleu builds on its double challenge

By Lisa Bornstein  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

This either will be Wendy Ishii's most brilliant idea or her greatest folly. There's not a lot of room for middle ground for the co-founder and artistic director of Fort Collins' Bas Bleu Theatre.

Not many people expand a com-

munity theater to double its audience size. Even fewer renovate a century-old machine shop to do it. They don't build the house before they've got the cash, and they certainly don't open it with both parts of *Angels in America*, one of the most lauded and challenging plays of the past century.

"I have this really insane idea to open our new theater that isn't

even built yet with the most difficult play ever written," Ishii says with a laugh.

Financially, Bas Bleu is expanding its budget and its seating without cash in hand. In fact, the \$3 million capital campaign hasn't officially begun — board members still are in the quiet stage of looking for deep pockets. But they have one benefactor who could be

one of the greatest mortgage lenders a company ever had: former-Beirut hostage Thomas Sutherland, who formed a limited liability corporation to buy the building and turn it into a theater for \$1.1 million. The plan is for Bas Bleu to buy the theater back by 2006.

"Usually you raise money, buy

Flip to ANGELS on 14D

## Angels in America

### ■ When and where:

*Part I: Millennium Approaches* opens Oct. 8; *Part II: Perestroika* opens Oct. 22. The two run in repertory through Nov. 20 at Bas Bleu Theatre, 401 Pine St., Fort Collins

■ **Cost:** \$10 to \$25

■ **Information:**

970-498-8949



**Bas Bleu co-founder and artistic director Wendy Ishii, left, portrays the Angel and Todd Coulter plays Prior in *Angels in America*, in rehearsals at Bas Bleu Theatre in Fort Collins.**

WILLIAM A. COTTON

## Angels: Fort Collins sees rare collaboration

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the building, fix the building up," says board member Gary Thomas. "We bought the building, fixed the building up and now we're gonna raise the money."

The new home is a century-old machine and blacksmithing shop most attractive for its historical status and the trusses that allow for no interior columns or load-bearing walls. That provides for some terrific open sight lines in a space that originally was 110 feet long and 58 feet wide.

The first construction phase is nearly complete, dividing the first floor into an office/lobby/art gallery, modern bathrooms and a 99-seat theater. Eventually, the theater hopes to add second-floor offices, a rehearsal space and a backstage scene shop.

The opening production, *Angels in America*, has become possibly the largest theatrical collaboration in Fort Collins history. Although Bas Bleu is underwriting the show's budget, in-kind contributions have come from its competitor, OpenStage Theatre, Colorado State University and the Northern Colorado AIDS Project.

"It is just fabulous the way the community has galvanized behind this project," Ishii says. "We're building this beautiful sandbox across the tracks here, and I wanted everyone to come and play in it."

Even the directors are collaborating, with Laura Jones, head of the CSU theater department, directing *Part I* and Denver director Terry Dodd taking on *Part II*. Although Jones says she felt only mildly pressured to include them in the cast, Ishii is playing the Angel, OpenStage artistic director Denise Burson Freestone plays Hannah Pitt and OpenStage producer Bruce K. Freestone plays Roy Cohn.

"We knew that we wanted to find a slot for Wendy and we knew that we wanted to use Bruce and Denise if we could," Jones says. "I knew that no matter how it came out that people would appreciate that we are concerned first and foremost with the integrity of the script."

*Angels in America* opens on the heels of the HBO miniseries of the play, which last month beat *Roots* with the most Emmy awards ever. Ishii sees that as a marketing gift, and Jones sees it

### Leaps and bounds

Bas Bleu Theatre Company is making enormous financial and spatial jumps with its move to new digs blocks away from the original tiny brick storefront in Fort Collins.

- Typical show budget in old house: \$3,900
- Budget for both parts of *Angels in America*: \$15,900
- Seats in old theater: 49
- Seats in new theater: 99
- Previous annual budget: \$170,000
- New annual budget: \$260,000

do, because it's extremely theatrical," Jones says. "The intimacy of this space is so incredible, and the acoustics are terrific, too. It (the movie) doesn't matter because you're so close that you're right there in the scene with those people."

Meanwhile longtime friends Dodd and Jones had to navigate the pitfalls of having two directors on different parts of a single work.

"I'm sure Terry was apprehensive, because I had them first," Jones says. "Both parts are very different plays, so I think there will be some evidence of that (differing styles), but appropriately so."

And with two different perspectives, the directors will complement one another working on what Kushner himself subtitled *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, Jones says.

"I feel more comfortable working with Terry because I'm straight and he's gay, because I'm a woman and he's a man, because we bring different sensibilities to a play that deals with sexual politics."

There is still an enormous amount of work to be done. Even as new walls and paint gleamed, the company couldn't get into the theater until 13 days before opening. For strength, Ishii draws on her favorite playwright, Samuel Beckett.

"I can't go on," she quotes. "I'll go on."