

From Margaritas to Champagne

The Tale of a Little Salon Theatre That Could

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Many schemes have been hatched over a Rio Grande margarita, but few have produced as rare a bird as the Bas Bleu Theatre.

It was a grey December day in 1991 when Eva Wright and Wendy Ishii stepped out for a quick lunch. Ishii, a professional actress from New York, and Wright, a drama teacher, actress and director from Sweden, soon found they were artistic soul mates. Given their demeanors, perhaps it was inevitable they left the Rio determined to create a modern salon-style theatre in Fort Collins.

Fueled by enthusiasm, and perhaps a touch of tequila, the two wandered Old Town, pressing their noses against chilly windowpanes in search of an abandoned building that might serve as their theatrical home.

That quick lunch ended four hours later. The hard work has never ended.

Nearly thirteen years have passed and the second stage of that chilly winter dream has become a reality. The "little salon-theatre" begins its 2004-05 season Friday, October 8, in its new, "supersized" home: the historic Giddings Building at 401 Pine St.

It's a proud, exciting and nerve-inducing moment for all as Bas Bleu, in collaboration with OpenStage Theatre and the Colorado State University Theatre Program, opens Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*.

The Giddings Building may be yodeling distance from "Le Petit Bas Bleu," as Ishii calls their former home at 216 Pine St., but there's a world of difference in many other ways:

- Le Petit seats 49; Le Grand seats 99, with plans to expand to 149.

- Le Petit had zilch storage room. Le Grand: Well, there are several storage rooms

with vast ceilings, but they're already stacked to the rafters.

- Le Petit's lobby was so small that intermissions were shoulder-to-shoulder. Le Grand not only has a commodious lobby but there's some room in the theatre for chatting as well.

Of course, many theatre fans have a strong affection for Le Petit Bas Bleu. Its history has become integral to a city that prides itself on offering a variety of performing arts venues. Bas Bleu's history also is tied up with our affection for Old Town and how the theatre helped enliven that little-traveled block of Pine Street.

Landlord Les Sunde saw the potential and, although he had several offers, he viewed the building as part of his family and held out for just the right tenant. Bas Bleu's founders won his heart and renovations began.

The building that had once housed the Salvation Army and a TV repair shop was soon sporting a new floor, pressed-tin ceilings, a new light system and ancient mohair theatre seats, all courtesy of Sunde.

Paging through Bas Bleu's bursting history books of aging programs, reviews, fan letters and more, one can see the lights go up and the pancake makeup go on as the

theatre took its place on the Fort Collins' stage. The plays, names, actors past and present come spilling out of the pages.

(Strangely, two names in particular are repeated over and over: Wendy Ishii and Samuel Beckett, Wendy Ishii and Samuel Beckett. Does Doug Ishii know about this?)

Then there are the numbers: Ishii says they have produced, performed, exhibited or hosted over 450 events and a total of 1,000 performances that were viewed by more than 30,000 patrons and involved more than 2,100 artists, performers, writers, designers and technicians.

The list of Bas Bleu's awards is extensive. But perhaps the most prestigious awards

are letters from fans; two in particular stand out.

The first was written after a performance of Bas Bleu's premiere production, *Duet for One* by Tom Kempinski. The woman thanked Ishii for her powerful performance as a famous violinist with multiple sclerosis, saying she was writing from the viewpoint of "one who lives it."

"As you portray...[i]t is very difficult to find and establish a new identity when just surviving can be unpredictable and self-esteem a fleeting commodity. Thank you for helping to educate others."



The building Bas Bleu now calls home, circa a long time ago.

A second woman wrote in 1995 after viewing *Trifles*, a story of spousal abuse.

"You were talking about me. I am educated, a professional and a very sophisticated woman...but I never saw the pattern of abuse until Thursday night. I can say with certainty that the chain is now broken—thanks to you—because with my new awareness, I am on the path to healing."

Such a rich history—a rich harvest—in such a tiny little building.

And now the company faces the challenge of Le Grand Bas Bleu, a building with its own history and its own unforeseen problems.

With move-in just thirteen days before opening night, Ishii says the entire company was so frazzled they were happy to go with an "industrial-chic" look for the set, playing off the theatre's bare concrete floor and exposed ductwork.

After all, it's a play with raw emotions, so why not a raw set?

More raw emotions will be on display in the building's lobby/art gallery, where ten artists' work relate to issues affecting the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. The questions posed and the thoughts inspired by these works are all a part of the Bas Bleu experience as conceived over margaritas thirteen years ago on a grey winter day at the Rio Grande.

Although cofounder Eva Wright is now involved in other pursuits, she'll be on hand for the inaugural toast opening night; but this time it'll be champagne, not margaritas. ☞

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Angels in America: Millennium Approaches debuts on October 8, followed by *Angels in America: Perestroika* on October 22; both shows run in repertory through November 20. Tickets available online at ticketleap.com or call 970/498-8949. Look for a review of part one in next week's *Bullhorn*.