

Green Party: A Beloved Venue Gets a Theatrical Make-Over as the Green Room

Written by Mike Schulz

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So, fellow fans of the former Brew & View, there's good news and bad news:

The good news is that the building that housed this haven for independent releases (and those who love them) will once again be open for business.

The bad news is that it won't be screening independent movies. Or, for that matter, movies of a *ny* kind.

Yet while the hearts of film lovers might break, those of theatre lovers should rejoice, as Derek Bertelsen and Tyson Danner realize a live-entertainment dream with the August 10 unveiling of the Green Room, their new theatrical venue at 1611 Second Avenue in the District of Rock Island.

Named after the backstage area where performers traditionally relax prior to a show, the Green Room, according to its introductory press release, "will be home to fully mounted plays and musicals, a cabaret series, and readings of new works by local and national playwrights." The venue opens on Friday with a production of Stephen Sondheim's Tony-winning fairy-tale musical *Into the Woods*. Bertelsen directs, with Danner serving as musical director.

If you're familiar with both the work and the venue, you may well be asking, "How the hell do

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you produce that large a show in that small a space?" And your skepticism might be compounded when you discover just how

young

the Green Room's proprietors are: Both 22, Bertelsen is a 2007 graduate of Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois, and Danner is a 2007 graduate of St. Ambrose University. But despite their youth, this is hardly the first theatrical challenge these impresarios have faced.

Having met through Quad City Music Guild (when they both appeared in the organization's 2003 production of *State Fair*), Bertelsen's and Danner's first directorial collaboration was a 2005 fund-raising performance of the musical *Ragtime*. Aside from school experiences, Bertelsen and Danner were untried directors, and the cast boasted an overwhelming 65 participants, yet local awareness of the production was high, and the show ended up raising some \$12,000 for the Children's Therapy Center of the Quad Cities.

Presented at St. Ambrose's Galvin Fine Arts Center, the production was so successful that the pair was given the green light to stage another intimidating musical there in 2006: 1991 Tony winner *The Secret Garden*. The show "made just about as much [for the Center] as *Ragtime*," says Bertelsen, and helped convince him and Danner to pursue a theatrical organization - and venue - of their own.

A Permanent Place

"We wanted a permanent place," says Danner, "just to have a permanent *presence*, where people knew

we were always going to be. And having a bunch of shows in a season, we'll get the opportunity to have one or two that no one's heard of that

we

really love, and then be able to do some that are more traditional that we can have our own take on."

During an Internet search of Rock Island buildings for rent, Bertelsen discovered the availability of the former Brew & View site (which neither he nor Danner had been to during its 2002-5

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movie-theatre incarnation). It appeared to be exactly what he and Danner were looking for; not only was the venue - which the pair expect will accommodate 50 audience members - the right size for their needs, but also their wallets, as the venture is currently being funded with what Bertelsen jokingly refers to as "pocket money."

"We've managed to get by so far with no loans, which is great," says Danner. "We got a really great deal from the landlords, and we've had lots of help - people donating things, and bringing costumes that they don't want anymore We've got tons of help, but no *employees*."

There are, obviously, a great many people who would like to see the young men succeed in their new endeavor, as least if *Into the Woods*' cast list is to be trusted. Among the show's actors are numerous, well-known talents familiar from Music Guild - Jenny Winn (

You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown

), Sheri Hess and Sarah Ulloa (both of

Beehive

), Erika Thomas (

Thoroughly Modern Millie

), Christopher Thomas (

The Wizard of Oz

), Lauren Van Speybroeck (

Beauty & the Beast

) - and many of these and other

Into the Woods

performers also worked with Bertelsen and Danner in both

Ragtime

and

Secret Garden

.

"We kind of lucked out and wound up with some fantastic people," says Danner of his and Bertelsen's earlier endeavors, "and luckily, have kept them with us."

The duo is holding off on announcing a full season of Green Room titles until August 10's opening night. They do, however, reveal that *Into the Woods*' follow-up will be in a decidedly different vein: a staging of Tennessee Williams' tragicomic memory play, *The Glass Menagerie*.

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"We've got a production scheduled about every two months," says Danner, "and for now we're scheduling them two weekends apiece. And then we'll see; if those start getting pretty full, we may start adding weekends, or if it's a smaller show that nobody's ever heard of, we might only do one weekend.

"We have interests that aren't necessarily the mainstream musicals that everyone's heard of - that people are gonna flock to."

Hence, *Into the Woods*.

Almost Brecht-ian

The show is hardly an unknown title. Sondheim's work, in which famed storybook characters discover what happens *after* "happily ever after," won three Tony Awards and was filmed - with Bernadette Peters and the rest of the original Broadway cast intact - for PBS'

American Playhouse

series. The 1987 musical, however, has never been performed in the Quad Cities on a professional or community level, in part due to its rather extraordinary technical demands.

Yet if you're hoping to see towers grow from the ground and giants fall from the sky in the Green Room, you're likely to be disappointed.

Describing their production - in which, again, Bertelsen directs and Danner music directs - Danner says, "It's not meant to ... I don't know how to put it. ... It's not like you're going to see the Broadway show and everything's done *for* you." As befits their space, the collaborators are taking a minimalist approach toward this *Into the Woods* :

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oles are double- and triple-cast, the magical effects will be left to the audience's imagination, and no effort will be made to hide the "backstage" process.

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"It's almost Brecht-ian," says Danner. "You see the actors working in the space, and the *challenges* 0

f the space, and you see what they do to overcome them. You see what they do when they change characters, because sometimes it needs to happen within 10 seconds of stage time. It's all kind of laid out there - this is what the actors are doing to create this story.

"*Into the Woods* is so based on storytelling and imagination in the *first* place," he adds, "that it gives us a lot of leeway."

It helps, of course, to have imaginative friends helping you. After formulating their concept for *In to the Woods*

' staging, Bertelsen says, "I just e-mailed about 10 people and said, 'Hey, let's get together on a Sunday afternoon and sing through parts of the score.' And we kind of told them our concept, and it just went from there."

While the Green Room's proprietors do intend on having local auditions for forthcoming productions, Bertelsen admits that, for their first production in the Green Room, "it's nice to have a group of people that you trust, and that trusts you."

With 10 days to go before the venue's debut, he says, "I wouldn't want this to be someone's, like, first show [with us]. You know, it's a new space, we have no *chairs* yet. ... It's pretty bare-bones right now. So it's nice to have a group of people that can just come in and trust that it'll be up and running by opening night."

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He adds with a laugh, "It might be two *minutes* before opening night ... !"

The Green Room's proprietors admit that the challenge of launching a new business while conducting nightly rehearsals hasn't always been easy. ("There've been some headaches," admits Bertelsen. "There've been some ... *drinks* had after rehearsal.") But the process must be going relatively well, because when asked what shows they'd like to produce down the road, Bertelsen's immediate answer is, "The whole Sondheim canon." ("Well, maybe not *all* of them," counters Danner. "There are a few clunkers.")

Yet no matter what they choose to stage, Bertelsen and Danner want the Green Room to promote a dialogue between artists and audiences; *Into the Woods*' opening night will be followed by a talk-back session - "Green Talks" - in which the patrons are encouraged to voice their opinions about the evening's production with the directors and cast. "If people didn't understand something," says Bertelsen in reference to the post-show discussion, "well, *tell* me, you know? I'm new at this, I'm 22 years old. ... I'm not perfect.

"We really want this to be a place where people can *talk* about theatre," he continues. "Instead of walking in, reading your program, and then leaving after the show and going to bed, why don't we think about it and talk about it a little bit?"

And what would Bertelsen and Danner like the Green Room to be, say, a year from now?

Bertelsen pauses, and replies, "Open?"

The Green Room is located at 1611 Second Avenue in the District of Rock Island. Into the Woods will be performed August 10 through 12, and more information on the show and venue is available by calling (309) 786-5660 or visiting (

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<http://www.thegreenroomtheatre.com>

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