

Le Petit Theatre reopens

Will Coviello on the return of the French Quarter playhouse that signals a revival of the downtown theater scene



Between meetings with members of the board of directors and part-time staff overseeing season ticket sales and technical work, Cassie Steck Worley is sitting in the balcony of Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carré. A crew is installing stage lights in the backstage rafters. She officially started serving as the theater's executive director the week prior. Before that, she was president of the board of directors for four years, but she's been active with the theater for much longer.

"I've played a lot of roles at Le Petit," she says, smiling at the double meaning. Worley first appeared on Le Petit's stage in 1978 in *Dracula*, and as Louise in *Gypsy* in 1982. Board member Bryan Batt sang in the chorus of *Gypsy* after Worley convinced him to audition.

"It looks the same as it always did," she says.

In spite of being closed for more than two-and-a-half years, having half of the building sold to the Dickie Brennan & Co. restaurant group and reconfiguring backstage facilities, the theater will look very familiar to returning patrons.

"It's *not* a new theater," Worley says. "It's Le Petit with a new coat of paint, new carpeting — looking good and ready to open."

Le Petit reopens Friday, July 19, with a staged reading of Nora and Delia Ephron's *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* directed by Carl Walker and starring a rotating cast including New Orleans native and Broadway star Mary Louise Wilson (*Grey Gardens*, *Cabaret*), Leslie Castay, Janet Shea, Lara Grice, Nell Nolan, Carol Sutton and others. The production originally was scheduled as an addition to the 2013 season, but delays in renovations and rescheduling have made it the reopening show. *Lombardi*, the 2010 Broadway play about legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi, still will open the official season, but in September instead of last January, as originally planned.



Cassie Steck Worley, former president of Le Petit's board, became the theater's executive director in June.

Delays in renovations of old buildings are nothing new in New Orleans. If anything, the extended closure and financial crisis have helped remind locals of their affection for Le Petit, Worley says.

"One of the good things that came out of the theater having to close is, I think, the community realizing how much they love this building and Le Petit Theatre," she says. "The community is very excited about the work Dickie Brennan put into that side (where he opened the restaurant). There's more activity on this corner."

Brennan's restaurant [Tableau](#) opened in April around the time of the French Quarter Festival. Many locals dining at the restaurant have peeked in on the theater's progress.

What theatergoers see in the renewed Le Petit will reflect the older theater, but not necessarily the one that closed in 2010. The space now occupied by Tableau was not part of the original theater. It was purchased in the early 1960s, and though it was home to popular programming and held the small stage called Children's Corner, the theater had more space than it could use productively or afford to maintain, Worley says.

In the past decade, the theater's schedule was dominated by large musicals, but the new approach will mix musicals and dramas, much like Le Petit did in the 1970s, '80s and '90s. Some of that change is an acknowledgement that large musical productions are returning to the Saenger Theatre, which has been closed since Hurricane Katrina, and other downtown theaters. Le Petit also is making a point of scheduling at least one Pulitzer Prize-winning play every season. Producing great American dramas will help the theater's new emphasis on reaching students and developing young audiences, Worley says.

The inaugural season features the musicals *Hair* (Nov. 8-23) and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (July 11-26, 2014), the one-woman show *Golda's Balcony* (Jan. 24, 2014-Feb. 8, 2014), about Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, and *Death of a Salesman* (May 9-24, 2014), Arthur Miller's 1949 Pulitzer Prize winner.



Le Petit Theatre's lobby was renovated and named for law firm Jones Walker.

Le Petit reopens as entertainment is blossoming in downtown spaces. In the last couple of years, while Le Petit has been dark and Southern Rep used different locations before moving productions to the Contemporary Arts Center, smaller theaters in the Marigny and Bywater have attracted theatergoers. The musical *Upstairs* just premiered at Cafe Istanbul in the New Orleans Healing Center, and Cripple Creek Theatre Company recently completed a successful run of the Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Clybourne Park* at Shadowbox Theatre. AllWays Lounge and Theatre also has hosted impressive musical productions.

There will be more offerings at large downtown theaters in fall. The Saenger Theatre reopens on Sept. 28 with two stand-up performances by comedian Jerry Seinfeld. Touring Broadway in New Orleans productions move to the Saenger from the Mahalia Jackson Theater for the Performing Arts. The season includes the multiple Tony Award-winning smash *The Book of Mormon* (Oct. 15-27) from *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone, *Ghost the Musical* (Nov. 19-24), *Sister Act* (Dec. 17-22), *Rain: A Tribute to the Beatles* (Jan. 17-19, 2014), *Disney's Beauty and the Beast* (Feb. 4-9, 2014), *Memphis* (March 11-16, 2014) and *War Horse* (May 13-18, 2014). Saenger General Manager David Skinner expects to present 45 to 50 concerts per year at the theater. Freeing up the Mahalia's calendar allows it to host more concerts by the

Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra and additional performances presented by the New Orleans Ballet Association and New Orleans Opera Association.

The Joy Theater also announced a fall schedule of shows, including *Beatlemania Now* (Sept. 12-Oct. 6), comic Dena Blizzard's *One Funny Mother: I'm Not Crazy!* (Oct. 11-27), *Tony n' Tina's Wedding* (Oct. 29-Nov. 3), *Valentine's Burlesque* (Nov. 7-Dec. 1) and *Lightwire: A Very Electric Christmas* (Dec. 12-22), by Lightwire Theater, the local dance theater group that reached the finals of *America's Got Talent*. The Civic Theatre also reopened and recently held a staged reading of *8* by Dustin Lance Black, the award-winning screenwriter of *J. Edgar* and *Milk*.

Worley sees the wealth of offerings as good for Le Petit.

"In New Orleans, you can't have too many good restaurants," she says. "You can't have too much good theater. The more people go, the more they're going to go."



A portrait of former Le Petit artistic director Stocker Fontelieu decorates the new women's dressing room.

Originally opened in 1916, Le Petit Theatre was one of the oldest continuously running community theaters in the nation when it canceled its season and closed in November 2010. An accumulation of debts from old renovations, Hurricane Katrina damage and annual deficits put the theater in a dangerous financial position. In March 2009, Le Petit's board fired its five staff members and turned over management to the Solomon Group. A year and a half later and with \$700,000 owed to creditors, it suspended operations.

Eventually, the board decided to sell the corner side of the building catercorner to Jackson Square. Several offers were made, but the board settled on the sale of 60 percent of its space to Dickie Brennan & Co. for \$3 million. Many longtime patrons objected to the sale. Some were concerned that the restaurant would compromise the theater; others preferred deals that did not involve giving up the corner space. The Brennan deal allowed the theater to retire its debt, pay for new renovations and create a \$500,000 endowment, Worley says.

The board rewrote its bylaws and articles of incorporation, making it solely accountable for managing the theater. The board also created subcommittees to guide development, finances and production.

Splitting the building has not affected the auditorium. The 368 seats are the same as before the sale. Renovations include new carpet, new light and sound boards and installation of permanent wheelchair-accessible seating.

The front of the house is altered. The lobby (now named for the law firm Jones Walker, which contributed 200 hours of legal work during the sale) has an entrance directly from the street. The former lobby is now used by Tableau, and the courtyard is shared. An additional staircase to the balcony seats was added on one side of the theater. The balcony also will have direct access to a room at Tableau that will provide bar service during show intermissions.

Backstage spaces have changed considerably. Dressing rooms used to be on the third floor in an area now used as a private dining room at Tableau. Le Petit built new men's and women's dressing rooms on its side of the complex and added office space. Renovations to the orchestra pit will allow use of the space for educational programs during the day. Le Petit gave up a large amount of mostly unused space in the backstage wing on the Chartres Street side.



Tableau and Le Petit share a courtyard.

"We had a green room the size of a football field," Batt says. "No one has that. That has saved the theater — the sale of that green room and the offices. We didn't need it. All that space wasn't being used. ... We (still) have more backstage space than the New York Theatre Workshop. We, technically, are an off-Broadway-size house. We have 365 seats. The New York Theatre Workshop gave us *Rent*, *Once*, which is on Broadway now, *Peter and the Starcatcher*. We just have to be creative.

"You can do so much with so little," Batt adds. "The original *Angels in America* was done in a black box theater with no set. Just lighting and costumes and the brilliant words. If it's done well, you don't need hydraulics and hundreds of thousands of dollars in costumes."

Keeping costs in line is a major focus as the theater resumes operations. In the past, the jobs of artistic director and theater manager were consolidated in one position, Batt says.

"I am an artist," he says. "I know I will spend too much to make something look great — even if I have to write too many checks. Someone has to say, 'No.' That's why the checkbook is on the business side."

The theater never had an endowment before, and fundraising is an ongoing effort. There isn't a capital campaign in place, but Worley is fundraising for specific events and programs. She found funding for educational programs with Good Shepherd School and Joseph S. Clark Preparatory High School. She says the theater also wants to partner with local nonprofits on some shows and programs.

The theater hasn't begun to sell individual tickets for shows yet, but Worley says the number of season subscriptions is double what they were when the theater closed. Marketing outreach, however, has not reached far beyond announcing the plays in the season.

Community engagement is a new focus for Worley and the board. New board president Bruce Hoefer is a former chairman of the board of Cafe Reconcile, the nonprofit restaurant industry training program for at-risk youth. He's also on the board of Good Shepherd School, and he's pushed the theater to reach out to area schools, including Joseph S. Clark, McDonogh 35 and others. Worley has initiated connections with Dillard University's theater department and the University of New Orleans' theater administration department.

"One of the main thrusts for me being on the board was community outreach," Hoefer says. "Because of my experience with Cafe Reconcile, and I'm on the board of Good Shepherd School, I wanted to make sure that our mission is not just to put on professional-level theater, not just to preserve the heritage, the tradition and the historic building, but also community outreach. We put this into our articles of incorporation, we want to give the underserved and at-risk boys and girls in the community exposure to the dramatic arts through theater education."

Batt says seeing a production of *Bye Bye Birdie* got him excited about theater. Whether that turns into a career or a lifelong interest, it's good for a community theater.

"The main missions of the theater are to produce great plays and musicals for the community, but also to educate a future audience," Batt says.