

Survival of the fittest

Cockroach Theatre endures a decade of obstacles to land its own downtown performance space

BY KELLE SCHILLACI

Cockroaches are scavengers — pests that can survive nuclear-level destruction. Which is to say, cockroaches might some day inherit the Earth. One thing's for sure: They've already taken a permanent residence in the heart of the Arts District, scoring their own Art Square Theatre.

The location is a huge coup for Cockroach Theatre, founded in 2002 by a group of UNLV theater alums devoted to bringing new, original and underappreciated works to Vegas audiences. When it produced its first play that year — *Line*, by Israel Horowitz, about five people vying for position in a line — more than 400 audience members showed up for the play's run. "Horowitz isn't exactly risky material," says Cockroach Managing Director Levi Fackrell. "But it showed us that Vegas audiences were hungry for something different."

Fackrell describes those early days as "fun, guerilla-style theater," as it scoured the valley for play venues, scuttling about in junkyards, warehouse spaces, hotel bars and the requisite-for-the-times Katherine Gianacis Park.

Its unique mix of original and unusual performances — Albert Camus' *Caligula*, Naomi Iizuka's *Tattoo Girl* and a particularly avant garde 2005 production of Richard Foreman's *Permanent Brain Damage*, to name a few — kept Cockroach afloat, despite some rough patches, like the tanking of a 2008 Neonopolis deal and the rough economic years that followed. True to its tenacious moniker, it survived and made its way to the city's cultural epicenter.

Déjà vu all over again

It's all vaguely familiar, this talk of downtown serendipity — it struck years ago, when the First Friday phenomenon started transforming the neighborhood, drawing unlikely crowds into galleries and black box theaters, many of whom elbowed through the art and talked over the plays. It would take an injec-



The crew from Cockroach Theatre: Levi Fackrell, left, Will Adamson, center, and Erik Amblad

tion of post-recession creative energy, fueled largely by locals (and maybe some help from a man named Hsieh) to get the downtown renaissance back on track.

By 2010, Cockroach had risen from a brief hibernation to collaborate with Born and Raised Productions, a company co-founded by Vegas native Erik Amblad, and, in 2012, after clandestine meetings and a crowd-funded

campaign that raised more than \$23,000 in 70 days, Cockroach finally got the chance to pull the trigger on a decade-old dream.

What's old is new

Exposed brick. High ceilings. Industrial-style charm meets pure, unadulterated potential. "It's a modern space," says Fackrell of the renovated Art Square Theatre. "But

the space has had a previous life. We've kept those elements intact."

"You can be as creative as you want to be here," says Amblad, who was named Cockroach's artistic director in April and who, like Fackrell, speaks of the permanent space the way a new father might boast about his child.

Art Square, just north of the Arts Factory, also houses Artifice Bar and Lounge, several galleries, the First Street ArtGarden and the Josephine Skaught Salon. While its new high-profile digs will likely increase its audience, Cockroach remains committed to doing what it's always done: taking risks and staging original, edgy and exciting shows.

"The space is the perfect size for us and for the type of plays we do," says Fackrell. "We chose this size so we wouldn't have to compromise. We don't have to fill the Smith Center, we have to fill a 100-seat theatre."

Judging from opening night, that shouldn't be a problem.

Nurturing new talent

When Cockroach opened its new space to an enthusiastic, sold-out crowd on Sept. 21, it was a night of firsts: the first-ever performance in Art Square Theatre and the first-ever staging of *Nurture*, an outrageously dark comedy directed by Jason Goldberg and written by Johnna Adams, winner of Off-Strip Productions' first-ever Sin City New Play Contest. Having not seen them share a stage since I covered theater in 2005, it was great to see Francine Gordon and Erik Amblad tackle the roles of perhaps the two most painfully and hilariously inept parents on the planet.

The triumphant grand opening was followed by a celebration that spilled into the halls and bars, filling old spaces with new energy and exciting audiences about what's to come in Cockroach's 2012-13 season, officially opening Oct. 26 with Paula Vogel's comedy *The Mineola Twins*, and ending with Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

"The season is very particular to this moment in time, and where we all are, professionally and personally," Amblad says of the upcoming five plays, one of which he'll direct, and another to be helmed by Fackrell. "We're growing up, settling down and facing the future."

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