

New hope for Bindlestiff as city, theater renew relationship

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row, bought the SRO hotel for \$1.8 million to build low-cost housing. Redevelopment appeared ready to award the contract to rebuild the Plaza to SoMa nonprofit developer TODCO, the only outfit answering the request for proposals. TODCO proposed building 115 units and a theater it would sell to Bindlestiff for \$1.

"They could own the theater separately," John Elberling, TODCO CEO, said in an interview. "They talked it over and said yes. But it didn't go far."

The commission delivered a shocking 4-3 vote in October to reject TODCO. Then came an even bigger surprise at that same meeting. The commission voted to create its own nonprofit developer, the Public Initiative Development Corp., for the sole purpose of rebuilding the four-story Plaza, after 20 years of bidding low-cost housing to nonprofits.

Mayor Willie Brown had directed Redevelopment to become its own developer of low-cost housing, Elberling said.

"This was payback," he said. "Willie told Chantel Walker, the commission president, to vote it down." Walker, a Brown appointee, quit a few months later.

Elberling said he and the mayor were on opposite sides of the city's explosive downtown growth issue. Elberling supported the slow-growth Prop L in the 2000 November election. Brown vigorously fought it

when it was clear his own initiative, Prop K, was not going to win. Prop K would have doubled the prevailing limit on the amount of office space, and it had more exemptions than Prop L. Both failed.

"It's my personal viewpoint that Willie was sending a message to the nonprofit developers that didn't get behind him on Prop K when he made Redevelopment its own developer. He was saying this is what happens if you don't stay in line politically."

Calls over two days and an e-mail request for Brown's reaction went unanswered.

Bindlestiff and TODCO had the support of SoMa residents, and students and professors from S.F. State, Stanford and Cal. Two protest rallies against the commission action were held later in October on the steps of City Hall. But nothing changed.

In 2003, making way for construction, the agency kicked Bindlestiff out of the old Plaza and relocated it around the corner.

The Plaza Apartments were completed early this year and included what would be Bindlestiff's main floor entrance and box office space with the theater in the basement.

"We wanted them to move into it," says Mike Grisso, Redevelopment's SoMa project manager. "If it weren't for Bindlestiff, we wouldn't have built the shell. It would have been other new low-cost housing. But we want to support art projects."

Bindlestiff was to ante \$500,000 to \$750,000 for tenant improvements to equip and furnish the theater. So far, according to one board member, Bindlestiff has raised \$20,000.

This month, Redevelopment is expected to extend a grant agreement with Bindlestiff to the end of the year. The original three-year, \$300,000 grant earmarked \$75,000 to stimulate matching grants for the theater. The remaining \$225,000 was for moving expenses and to help Bindlestiff stay afloat during construction, hire architects, a project manager and a fund-raiser. It expired last December when Bindlestiff was in organizational disarray. About \$100,000 is left, Grisso says, but Bindlestiff can't have it until a contract is in place.

Meanwhile, the theater's activities barely support it. It has one paid employee, the manager, assisted by dozens of volunteers. It is "hanging by its fingernails on the edge of the arts scene," says SomArts Director Jack Davis. He has

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known the group since it began and last year he rented Bindlestiff the SomArts theater for its annual rock and roll show. "It's extremely healthy what they are trying to do," Davis says. "And they are doing a good job of keeping alive what they are doing in a distressed neighborhood, and reinventing themselves. But they've little resources to fall back on and economic pressures are squeezing people out. The Filipino population has even more elements threatening it, forcing it to leave the neighborhood. I've dealt with three or four generations (of staff) at Bindlestiff and they have my respect. It's a heroic struggle for them."

An extension would be a second chance and a ray of hope among other shards of encouragement that have surfaced in the last two months. The theater group is in recovery mode after being unable to contend with the theater buildout costs.

Bindlestiff is well situated in SoMa, where the Filipino community is estimated to be 30% of the population. The 3-year old Bayanihan House at Sixth and Mission, which Redevelopment rebuilt, using TODCO, has a ground-floor Filipino Cultural Center on the spot World War II Filipino veterans gathered socially when it was the Delta Hotel that was destroyed by fire. Across the street from Bindlestiff is Cher's Grill House, a Filipino restaurant for 11 years.

Three blocks away is Bessie Carmichael Elementary School where 59% of the enrollment is Filipino. Between Sixth and Seventh on Folsom, a SoMa park is being built on the old Bessie school site. There's a move to name it after Victoria Manalo Draves, a Filipina, who in 1948 became the first woman in Olympic history to win two gold medals in diving.

Since 1997, the original theater and the current, modest one at 505 Natoma off Sixth, have been a stage for Filipino original drama, film, puppetry, arts workshops and community outreach, plus a venue for visiting cultural activities. It was in 1997 that then-artistic director Allan Manalo "transformed the theater into the cultural epicenter for Filipino American performing arts in the Bay Area," according to the Bindlestiff's Web site.

But its origins go back to 1989 when a group of 15 Filipino actors, writers and artists formed Teatro ng Tanan (theater for everyone), to create and perform plays targeted for Filipino audiences. But TnT (a tease also on the Tagalog phrase tago ng tago, meaning always hiding illegal aliens) had no venue and worked out of an office on 16th Street.

By 1997, TnT had split up. Some members went to a residual group, Tongue in a Mood, and started looking for a theater space.

"We had heard of Bindlestiff theater and Chrystene Ells who founded it," says Alex Torres a director, writer, actor, musician and graphic artist, and a member of both groups.

Ells, a Canadian, had discovered the vacant storefront at 185 Sixth a few years before and fixed up the space to do theater, workshops and outreach to neighborhood kids. The Bindlestiff name was her creation, inspired by the environment. It's the opposite of a working stiff. It comes from the Depression and means hobo. Bindle is slang for bundle or bedroll; it's also a junkie's drug paraphernalia.

"It was a cool name," Torres says. "And yeah, we were hobo artists. It's our Bindlestiff now. It was a metamorphosis. But it's open to other theater. It would be hard to justify if it had a Filipino name. It's just theater and still Filipino-centered."

In 2002, Redevelopment was relocating hotel tenants. For Bindlestiff, it found a smaller venue at 505 Natoma, around the corner from the Plaza.

Some artists, like Torres, believed the money Redevelopment was asking for the new theater would amount to more than the \$750,000 high end the agency estimated.

"Bindlestiff was in the throes of raising \$1 million — that's the figure we were using — when things started going wrong," said Torres, a former member of the San Francisco Mime Troupe. "I was asked to be on the board but I declined. I thought it was foolish, facing that much money to raise."

"But they were young artists, and who were they to say anything? Maybe it was wrong people, wrong time. Reports weren't getting submitted. And I didn't understand how it could be so expensive. It seemed ostentatious. We were artists doing art in a small cheap place." He pauses. "Even so, we had to fly legit."

After being "out of the inner circle for a couple of years," Torres joined the board in 2005 after he had been asked to direct a play at the Natoma Street Bindlestiff. The board had a lot of new faces, he said. Some left. Eight now remain. He learned of the contract with the city and its December deadline when Bindlestiff was to have raised \$165,000. Bindlestiff didn't have it. All it had was a goal of \$465,000. It was the bare bones figure for lights, sound proofing, construction of bathrooms, dressing rooms and box office that the Redevelopment architects said were needed. It was

a step down from whatever \$1 million or \$750,000 would buy, but Redevelopment agreed to it.

Still, Bindlestiff was not yet credible.

"We want to support art projects," says Redevelopment's Grisso. "But they (Bindlestiff) need to build, too. That was the goal behind the grant agreement. We don't give out all the money. They've got to help. That was the case with Bayanihan House, too. They paid for tenant improvements."

In meetings that Grisso and Redevelopment Director Marica Rosen had with board members Torres, Bindlestiff manager Bryan Pangilinan and photographer-SoMa community organizer Angelica Cabande, the agency stressed how Bindlestiff needed to measure up to its responsibility. The agency could have cut the theater loose. But seeing that the three board members weren't going to give up, kept a possible future alive.

Things took an upward turn in March and April. The commission authorized Redevelopment staff to seek Rincon Hill mitigation funds for Bindlestiff and the Alice Street Community Gardens in Yerba Buena Park. The mayor's office granted Bindlestiff \$60,000 to develop a green room, or performers' waiting room, in the theater shell, but only after it secured a lease. On April 17, SOMPAC recommended to the agency that it extend the Bindlestiff contract and that the two staffs work together "to develop a new time line and appropriate milestones."

To board member Cabande, who was at the meeting, it represented "a new relationship," she said. "There had been a lack of understanding before. We want to be professional, we want a mutual relationship with both parties being accountable."

The next night the Redevelopment Commission, not yet in receipt of the resolution, appeared to have a change of heart, says Torres, who attended the meeting. Bindlestiff wasn't on the agenda but it was referenced through another item. "And the commissioners that were attacking us before were now smiling and speaking up for us," he says. "It was mind-boggling."

In early May, Bindlestiff was elected to a seat on SOMPAC.

Grisso says probably in mid-May he will ask the commission for the extension through December. But first, he'll establish with Bindlestiff its milestones — how much money it will raise by when.

"And we'll have to have a backup plan," Grisso says. "If it can't raise the money, it might partner with another (theatrical) group. In three years, they haven't had much success raising money."

The small unfinished lobby and box office space in the Plaza Apartments doesn't seem destined for a swirl



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Anino designer Roselle Pineda with shadowplay on wall.

of theatergoers. It's a dusty storage area now, cluttered with paint cans, a half-dozen plastic-covered mattresses and long rolls of carpet. Down the staircase, the barren mezzanine invites more imagination. It has another place for concessions, restrooms and a green room.

Continuing down to the basement, a cold, gray and unadorned cavern opens up. The theater is roughly 25 by 50 feet with 30-foot-high walls and is small, pristine and oddly awesome. It's meant to change color and become a black box theater to seat 99. Behind it will be dressing rooms and storage. Top to bottom, the theater's total area is 4,000 square feet.

Pangilinan said the theater would benefit many art groups, not just Filipino. "It will only improve the neighborhood. And it's an inspiration for it."

Meanwhile, across the street and into the alley, the operating Bindlestiff Theater was preparing that night to show the film "Florence at Laura" as a fund-raiser for its creators. The film is shadowplay by Anino, a group of a dozen multimedia artists from the Philippines who have been invited to participate in the 10th Annual World Festival of Puppet Art in Prague. The festival pays their expenses when they get there. The film is sort of a Romeo and Juliet theme but involves Christians and Muslim families. It is a free adaptation of the classic epic by 19th century poet Francisco Balagtas, considered the Tagalog equivalent of William Shakespeare.

The theater, run by volunteers from all over the Bay Area, has shows on weekends and rehearsals during the week. It seats about 50. Suggested donations that night were \$7 to \$15. ■



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

In the operating Bindlestiff theater on Natoma, manager Pangilinan and Torres (right) get ready for the evening's fundraiser.

Party central committees — where grassroots politics grows

BY MARJORIE BEGGS

The [Howard] Dean Democratic Club of Silicon Valley's Web site says it right out: "Some county committees are true kingmakers. . . . Others are toothless debating societies. . . . The county party central committee is the lowest form of elected office — but it is an elected office."

What do these committees do, and why are so many local pols or wannabes running in this June's primary for seats on them?

In District 13 — including the Tenderloin and SoMa — the Republican and Democratic central committees each has 23 candidates running for 12 seats and the term of office is two years.

In District 12, the western portion of the city plus Daly City, Republican voters have a choice of 22 candidates, Democrats 19. The Green Party has eight, Peace and Freedom one. Four other parties have committees but no candidates this year: American Independent, Libertarian, Natural Law and Reform.

AGAINST WAR IN IRAQ

The Extra dropped by the monthly Democratic Central Committee meeting April 26 at the State Building auditorium to see if that committee was —

well — making kings.

The members seated on stage beneath the gold state seal slightly outnumbered the audience. They passed one resolution demanding the government stop funding U.S. troops in Iraq and sent it on to the Northern California Democratic congressional delegation. Another resolution condemned Residential Builders Association President Joe O'Donoghue for a poem he wrote attacking a committee member. Then they voted to support one of two candidates running for a Superior Court judgeship.

The committee also got an earful during public commentary from Richmond District Democratic Club activist Richard Hansen, who faithfully registers voters twice a month at Masonic Auditorium after citizenship ceremonies, a practice he likened to "shooting fish in the bottom of a barrel."

"But we have a problem," he told the committee: 36% of California's population is Latino, yet only 14% are registered to vote. Now, he said, pending federal legislation would make "11 to 12 million of them felons. Why aren't Democrats speaking on this issue?"

The Extra missed the latest Republican committee meeting May 3 but got highlights from Mike DeNunzio, District 13 chairman, running again this year and also trying to unseat Rep. Nancy Pelosi.

"The most important resolution we passed at the committee meeting," DeNunzio said, "was a request

that came to us from Bob Okin — he's the chief psychiatrist at S.F. General. He wanted us to ask Mayor Newsom to ask the Department of Public Health for interim funding for the hospital's trauma center, whose state funding was cut out this year."

It passed, he said, "more or less unanimously."

IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL POLITICS

In an earlier interview, DeNunzio, who ran unsuccessfully for supervisor in District 3 in 2000 and has been on the GOP Central Committee since 1998, told The Extra why local politics are so important to him.

"The chair has to be the official voice of the party," he said. "San Francisco has 45,000 registered Republicans, only 11% of the voters, but the city also has 120,000 declined-to-state registered voters and some of those are closet Republicans. When Newsom ran against Matt Gonzales, a Green, our party turned out

and that's the only reason Gonzales was defeated. We need to build the party, one step at a time."

Generating local resolutions is essential. "Recently, on the immigration issue, we reminded Newsom that he swore to uphold the law, and we did the same thing with same-sex marriage. These are grassroots resolutions. I want to see sophisticated, articulate people who can describe the Republican message and have the energy to do the work."

Marc Salomon, a registered Green since 1991 and incumbent Green Central Committee member who's running again this year, also tried for supervisor in 2000, in District 6.

Salomon finished eighth in a field of 16 and called it his "master's degree in San Francisco politics." Two years ago he worked on Matt Gonzales' mayoral campaign.

Greens have to register more youth and people of color, he says, work best done by the central committee. "It takes grassroots work and we haven't dealt with it in the past. We do a lot of running for and winning elections and spending time on issues. And we're a volunteer operation with no models. There hasn't been a significant new party in a hundred years. So there are



David Villa-Lobos



Mike DeNunzio

forces plotting against us, too."

Unlike DeNunzio and Salomon, David Villa-Lobos, running for a District 13 Democratic Central Committee seat, is a newcomer to elective local politics. A Tenderloin resident for 25 years, his focus has been on quality-of-life issues in the TL and SoMa, he says. He was a precinct captain for Newsom in 2003 founded the Community Leadership Alliance, which brings together city officials and residents at neighborhood meetings. This year, he chartered the Civic Center Democratic Club.

"The central committee has no District 6 representation," Villa-Lobos says. "I've followed this for years and go to just about every monthly meeting. I want to strengthen the voice of impoverished people. Committee members are good people, but they don't have a clue about what life is like in these neighborhoods."

REGISTERING VOTERS

Republican Jennifer DePalma, central committee incumbent, ran against Pelosi two years ago, worked on President Bush's campaign, the Gray Davis recall and the Schwarzenegger election. A cum laude Princeton graduate with a law degree from the University of Chicago, she believes the committee's job is to sponsor candidates and do outreach, letting Republicans and decline-to-state voters know how

they can help.

Once a week, usually Saturdays, she's at an information table in the Marina or at the Ferry Building, working to register voters and passing out Republican literature.

"We're a small number of Republicans [in the city], but not as small as you think," she says. "Outreach is what we do best — we're very good at the nuts and bolts and we grow our volunteer base. We go to neighborhood fairs and we're at Masonic Auditorium for the citizenship swearing-in ceremonies. There are many nationalities and they have strong family values. So we're there to register them. Being there makes you happy to be an American."

Bruce Winderm is another first-time Democrat on the central committee lineup. He's held no offices here but did run for the central committee in 1992, for the Board of Supervisors in 2000, though he didn't make it to the ballot. However, in Portland, Ore.,



Jennifer DePalma

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