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Work progresses on new civic theater

Local company helping transform warehouse to Prairie Players' venue

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There was plenty of activity Saturday at Prairie Players Civic Theatre's new quarters, 160 S. Seminary St. The sounds were not those of actors speaking lines but rather the hammering of nails, the whine of circular saws and other construction noises as employees of Trillium Dell Timberworks began building a 120-seat theatrical space.

Adaptive reuse

'This is the beginning,' said Rick Collins, who, along with wife Laura Collins, owns the Knoxville company that donated its work. Trillium Dell began building a 47-foot-long wooden truss so that three posts supporting the second-story floor can be removed. Prairie Players bought the former MSI warehouse in June 2007. The brick building, which is better known for housing Wilson Paper, sits unobtrusively between Simpson Ltd. Collectors Firearms and a building that houses, among other things, Depot Hobby Shop. Rick Collins said six or seven employees from his company, along with students from Knox College, faced a fairly routine task.

'If I had my full crew here, we'd be done by 4 (p.m.),' he said shortly after 10 a.m. 'But that would be five more people.'

About eight years ago, Collins' company built one of the longest wooden trusses in North America for a bridge in British Columbia, Canada.

'We've done a lot of work in churches,' he said. 'Truss restoration, especially for adaptive use, is something we do across the state.'

Collins said his firm specializes in timber truss work, using southern yellow pine and fir.

'The most important thing is getting people to understand there can be adaptive reuse of old commercial buildings,' he said. 'We don't have to tear down, we can actually renovate.'

That philosophy fits perfectly with plans Prairie Players has for the former warehouse. The interior brick walls of the building will remain visible and will be part of the look of the theater and lobby area. The second floor of the building is already being used, mostly for storage. Costumes stored upstairs were protected from Saturday's work in a plastic enclosure.

Combining locations

While Prairie Players' used to be spread across three locations — the rehearsal building at 655 W. Losey St., costumes upstairs at Ducky's, 246 E. Main St., and offices in Old City Hall on South Cherry Street — everything will now be in the building on South Seminary Street. Both board Vice President Cheri Siebken and President Nancy Diemer said this will help bring a feeling of unity during productions, rather than isolation some felt previously.

Once the truss is in place and the poles are removed, the theater 'is going to be a big open space,' Siebken said.

Two overhead doors at the front of the building will be made into a more traditional entrance into the lobby. Diemer said the open theater space will allow for flexibility for theater-in-the-round performances and most any other configuration needed. There will be a stage when needed but not a permanent one.

Diemer admitted the building may appear non-descript from the outside, but it's a different story once one tours the interior.

'Inside this building is just a jewel,' Diemer said. 'It's just perfect for us.'

Prairie Players, which marks the 50th anniversary this year of its incorporation, will still have some productions in other venues.

'Because we can't do major musicals here,' Diemer said. The theater group currently is using one of the former cinemas at Sandburg Mall, while the summer musical will be in the Orpheum Theatre. The Seminary Street building is still zoned as a warehouse, which will need to be changed, as that prohibits more than 50 people being inside at any time.

Land owned behind the building and between it and the gun shop will allow for outdoor productions, Siebken and Diemer said.

No timetable has been set for completion of the project. Finishing the downstairs theater is considered Phase II, which Diemer said 'involves the major portion of the fund drive. It's going to take us several years.'

The amount of money needed to finish the work has not been made public. But, both women agreed the donation of work by Trillium Dell is a shot in the arm.

'It's been a struggle for us for the last number of years,' Siebken said. 'We've had to have our shows in different locations.'

'We see it (the new theater) as being an asset to the community,' Diemer said. 'It's a great location. We think it's a great asset to the downtown.'

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