

ARTS

btv

3 | THE PUBLIC SPACE  
Art by sculptor Kat Clear

4 | THE HEART OF ART  
An essay by David Symons  
Burlington accordionist, singer, cornetist, actor, and taxi driver



BROTHER,

could you spare some

REHEARSAL SPACE?

STORY | *Sally Pollak*  
BURLINGTON FREE PRESS

PHOTOS | *Emily McManamy & Ben Sarle*  
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*If it's Monday or Tuesday and you want a place to rehearse your play, don't try Contois Auditorium. The room is booked with city business.If you want to use the space in City Hall another day of the week, give Alan Campbell a call. He works for the Department of Parks and Recreation, where his duties include booking agent for city-owned spaces.*

Practice places for performing arts groups is a major challenge in and around Burlington, according to artists. Commercial space is largely unaffordable and unavailable. Other options are off limits, too, if only because neighbors don't want to put up with the noise or commotion — and because musicians don't want to lug drum sets all over Burlington, and beyond.

Roving rehearsals and itinerant space — whether city-owned or private — means packing, hauling and hiding props and other equipment. Or it means practicing with nothing, just a quiet space (and someone else's furniture), as actors and directors are required to do when they work in classrooms, church basements, friends' homes or warehouses.



Burlington City Arts. "I hear that a lot: There are places to perform but not rehearse. It gets discussed at times, depending on what brings up the issue. ... I think, long-term, at some point it would be great if there could be space dedicated to rehearsal space in the city. It would behoove us to look at our inventory, and hopefully that's something we'd be able to do in the next several years."

The city rehearsal rates are topped by those of a nonprofit theater that formed last summer in the Old North End, Off Center for the Dramatic Arts. The daily rehearsal rate is \$150; the theater aims to keep production costs down, in part, so actors can get paid.

The theater was established by a quartet of longtime Burlington actors and playwrights for the express purpose of creating affordable theater space, co-

"THE REASON WE STARTED IT, IS TO TRY TO CREATE A SPACE THAT WAS MORE AFFORDABLE FOR ARTISTS ..."

Apart from the inconvenience, expense and uncertainty that comes with scrounging for rehearsal space, the limited commodity takes an artistic toll, according to area actors and musicians. A reliable and adequate place to practice is vital to the creative process.

"When you're in a band, it's an expense to do your own art form, which becomes a bit disheartening," singer Ryan Krushenick said. "Music is part of Burlington's culture. Music livens up Burlington, and helps it be a cool city. To not have any places where there's an infrastructure of practice places is kind of unfortunate."

City reps agree: "No!" Campbell said, Burlington does not have enough suitable rehearsal space for performing artists. He was talking about private and public spaces in Burlington, not simply what's available through the city.

"It's the economics of it — specifically for small theater groups that need rehearsal space," Campbell said. "They can put up with just about anything, but it needs to be clean and it needs to be quiet and that is tough at a reasonable rate."

The city options — notably Memorial Auditorium and Contois — aren't terrific.

"We have these facilities," Campbell said. "The nature of the building at



Memorial isn't ideal. At Contois, its availability for long periods is challenging."

A drawback to the annex at Memorial Auditorium: Bouncing basketballs while you try to block a scene or rehearse dialog.

At Contois, be prepared to schlep equipment in and out, and to plan rehearsals around the theatrics of city

government, and rental fees that take into account union wages.

Yet Contois is one of the best deals in town: If you can book it, you can have it for \$20 an hour (with certain contingencies and limited rehearsal hours); Memorial rental is \$60 an hour, \$40 for nonprofits.

"I do think the city could do more," said Sara Katz, assistant director of

founder Paul Schnabel said.

"The reason we started it, is to try to create a space that was more affordable for artists, so that hopefully people will be able to pay each other for working," said Schnabel, an actor who performs with the Riot Group.

"We just wanted to grow the theater culture in Burlington," he said. "To create a space where people can take more chances and not have to worry about losing their shirts, and can do some stuff that's a little bit more adventurous and risky."

## PAY TO PLAY

Even for established theater groups, like Lyric Theater and Vermont Stage Company, finding rehearsal space is a difficult and expensive proposition.

Lyric Theatre, with 52 cast members for the production of "Peter Pan," rented space at the Schoolhouse, a private school in South Burlington. In past years, the community theater group that mounts two musicals a year has rented space at area dance studios, executive director Syndi Zook said.

Continued 2