

New Orleans CITYBUSINESS

Southern Rep looks for permanent home

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NEW ORLEANS -- Aimee Hayes said it is fitting that she's playing Blanche Dubois in an upcoming production of "A Streetcar Named Desire."

"Blanche loses her home and goes to New Orleans, to Elysian Fields," Hayes said. "In a small way, it reflects Southern Rep's journey."

That journey began 20 years ago when the regional theater opened on the third floor of Canal Place. It took an unexpected turn in December when the owners of the downtown mall gave the theater 30 days notice that it had to vacate the premises by the end of January.

That forced Hayes, artistic director of Southern Rep, and Marieke Gaboury, its managing director, to move their "Streetcar" production to Michalopoulos Studios at 527 Elysian Fields Ave., where it will run from March 21 to April 15.

But that only provides a solution for a single production. Southern Rep is still in search of a temporary home, which it hopes to secure by May while it continues the search for a permanent location.

Canal Place never intended to evict Southern Rep, but its hands were forced when George Solomon, owner of the Theaters at Canal Place, asked about the possibility of expansion, said Brandon Berger, asset manager for the mall.

Since first opening in Canal Place, Southern Rep has been on a year-to-year lease paying below-market rent. It made the most sense for the Solomon's theater to expand into that space, Berger said.

"Because of the success and power of the luxury theaters and how tremendously well they've been doing in terms of sales, they can pay full-market rent," he said. "As ownership, it's incumbent upon us to make a good economical decision that also enables us to continue to provide cultural entertainment."

The movie theater expansion will increase its size from five screens to nine and from 12,000 square feet of space to 21,000 square feet.

The expansion is expected to be complete after the summer and will offer the same amenities as the original theaters, including luxury seats and gourmet food by chef Adolfo Garcia.

"It greatly behooved Canal Place to have Southern Rep in there because the benefits aren't always simply in rent numbers," Berger said. "But for Canal Place Theaters wanting to expand, we'd still be in this great partnership with Southern Rep."

Gaboury and Hayes said Canal Place management has been supportive during the process, and they understand it's a business decision. But they admit that receiving a 30-day notice to vacate the premises in the middle of their 25th anniversary season was not an ideal situation.

Typically, when a theater company is searching for a new location, it conducts a capital campaign to raise money well in advance of the move, Hayes said. A site-specific business plan is crafted and the local government is petitioned for assistance.

None of this was possible given the short notice, Hayes said. Southern Rep can't even apply for grants until the fall because they missed the September deadline for 2012 awards.

Raising money for the arts is always a challenge, but in the current economic climate it is even more difficult, Hayes said.

"It's a really tough time for this to happen to us, and I don't know if we'll be able to find the support we need," she said. "It takes time to find a new space, but I have a sense of urgency about it because we don't know what the next emergency is going to be."

The main consideration when looking for a permanent home is how Southern Rep's audience will react, Hayes said. For 20 years, they have been able to see their favorite plays in a secure

building with ample parking adjacent to the French Quarter and the Central Business District, home to hundreds of restaurants and bars.

"What we need for our audience is parking, perception of ease and security," Hayes said. "Theaters are active from early in the morning to late at night, so you want to feel safe. And you want to be somewhere that feels right, that people will want to come to."