

# Local Thespians Waiting in Wings for New Performance Space

## State of the Arts

By Pamela Polston [01.13.10]

Photos by Matthew Thorsen



Paul Schnabel



Steve Goldberg



John D. Alexander



Genevra MacPhail

Amphitheater, anyone? Three longtime denizens of the Burlington theater community plan to transform a onetime loading dock into a rehearsal and performance studio, and it will be available to anyone who can pay a modest rental fee.

That's the general idea, anyway, for the **Off Center Theater** at 294-296 North Winooski Avenue — the building that houses CCTV and other nonprofits. Playwright **Steve Goldberg** and actors **John Alexander**, **Genevra MacPhail**, and **Paul Schnabel** expect to operate the space as a nonprofit and provide a sort of black-box room to local performing artists who can't afford more upscale venues. "It would be good for just about anybody but dancers," says Alexander. That's because the floor slopes at a gentle angle — hence the natural amphitheater — toward the garage doors that once served former building occupants Fassetts Bakery.

"Paul discovered the space and brought Steve in on it, and then me," Alexander explains. "**Ben Bergstein** leases the space, so we're working with him." Bergstein, who heads the **Vermont Performing Arts League** and **Folkids of Vermont**, presents events and classes at the **North End Studio** in the building. But part of his leased space, the loading dock area, has been used simply for storage. A small adjacent room will be removed, Alexander says, creating a larger space that should accommodate "60 to 70 seats, depending on what the fire marshal says," he notes, adding that there is "tons of parking" right outside.

The trio presented their plan to the Development Review Board last week. "All kinds of people showed up to support the idea, plus CEDO [Burlington's Community Economic and Development Office]," says Alexander. "It was really good to see. It seemed like it really clicked with the board, too."

Indeed, this Monday the board gave its approval to the project, pending one minor detail, "and congratulated us on the way out," says Alexander. Now there's a permit to obtain and a bit of destruction/construction work to be done, not to mention "incorporating and raising some money" to form the nonprofit, he notes. Opening Off Center for business "will be at least a month out."

That can't come too soon for local individuals and groups hungry for low-cost rehearsal space — and a cool performance venue that actually meets fire code. Stay tuned for updates.