

Off Center on the mark in Burlington opening

By Brent Hallenbeck, Free Press Staff Writer

The Off Center for the Dramatic Arts took, oh, about 30 seconds Wednesday night before establishing itself as the go-to place for edgy theater in Burlington.

The new performing-arts space off North Winooski Avenue in the Old North End began its four-night grand-opening celebration with Bread & Puppet's Lubberland National Dance Company. The Glover-based troupe performed a ripped-from-the-headlines work created only a day earlier, titled "Seven Dances for Gaza." Five performers dressed in white opened with a dance titled "Gaza Humanitarian Aid Flotilla Dance" in which they shouted and held a banner that read "how much longer" before they all collapsed to the stage.

Not only did the world-renowned political-theater company touch a still-tender wound -- last weekend's deadly encounter involving Israeli troops and volunteers delivering supplies to residents of the Gaza Strip -- but it also evoked a brouhaha in Burlington in 2007 when Bread & Puppet Theater founder Peter Schumann presented an art exhibit about Israel and Palestine during the South End Art Hop that angered many in the local Jewish community. The Off Center, it seems, is ready to confront controversy head-on.

The space itself is suited for theater that provokes. Located in an old loading-dock area at the rear of the North End Studio, the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts is a 65-seat black-box theater enveloped on three sides by dark curtains, outfitted with unobtrusive but effective stage lighting and happily devoid of aesthetic frills. With a full house Wednesday night it was also overly warm and funky-smelling. But that's fine, as it gave the place a whiff of the artistic underground; the Off Center is not meant to be a shrine to anything other than the creation of theater by small companies trying out new work for audiences hungry for adventurous theater at a decent price.

The trio of performances that followed the Lubberland National Dance Company were less in-your-face but demonstrated the potential of the Off Center as an incubator for burgeoning theatrical works. Burlington playwright Maura Campbell will stage her next work, "Flower Duet," at FlynnSpace in September, but had the chance to workshop her play with a trio of actors reading partially from scripts. Natalie Miller and Andy Butterfield portrayed a couple arguing over little things like his over-use of pepper while cooking; that tension turned out to be masking the stress caused by a flirtation with marital infidelity. Miller was joined in the second scene by Mia Adams, who portrayed a woman in a loveless marriage who desperately wanted a second child yet can't relate to her first ("What do you do when you're uncomfortable with your own daughter?").

University of Vermont theater major Julia DiFerdinando presented a scene from her innovative one-act script "The Neurotic Female: A Brain Play," in which Jessie Stuart was cast as the title character and Matt Trollinger personified a figment of her imagination -- both a conscience for her and a narrator for the audience as he described all the wishes and regrets the woman had for her all-too-miserable love life. "If you were in her head right now," Trollinger cautioned the audience, "you'd go crazy."

Vermont playwright/actress Monica Callan concluded the night with a comedic one-woman scene, "A Sunday Drive," in which she portrayed a bleach-blond, make-up-laden, pink-jacket-and-tight-pants-wearing woman driving as she spoke to her friend on her cell phone about her behavior at a party the friend hosted. The woman's driving was scary enough -- "I hope this is an accident because I hate waiting and waiting and waiting and then there's nothing" -- until it became clear how many ways she had offended her fellow party-goers, revealing her as the sort of person who thinks she knows everything about everyone else yet has no idea how she comes off to others.

Ben Bergstein, who runs the North End Studio and is providing the theater space to Off Center founders John D. Alexander, Stephen Goldberg, Genevra MacPhail and Paul Schnabel, said before Wednesday's performances that the Off Center will work only if patrons continue to fill the house and recommend to their theater-producing friends that the stage works there. "This thing, for many people, is a dream come true," Bergstein told the crowd, referring to a decades-long desire by many in the Burlington theater community to have a small, affordable performing-arts space. "Welcome, and I hope to see you, like, 100 times more."