

## Independent theater has a home...finally

By Jim Lowe Times Argus Staff

BURLINGTON – For years, underground theater in Burlington has remained right there – under ground.

The Queen City's offerings, though frequently good, have remained incredibly tame, especially for a college town. All that may now be changing.

Off Center for the Dramatic Arts, in an industrial complex in the Old North End, opened Wednesday with its four-day introductory Off Center Switch On Theater Festival, showcasing four area theater companies as well as its intimate, versatile and attractive professional theater space. Each evening through Saturday, Vermont theater groups will present samplings of their wares, helping to raise money for the long-needed new space.

Wednesday, Glover's legendary Bread and Puppet Theater performed an excerpt of its brand-new "Seven Gaza Dances," which will be presented through the summer at the Bread and Puppet Farm. Burlington playwright Maura Campbell offered an intriguing sample of her soap opera-like "Flower Duet," which will premiere in September at FlynnSpace.

The UVM Department of Theatre was represented by a reprise of part of its witty and charming take on twentysomething dating, "The Neurotic Female: A Brain Play." And Monica Holm starred in Fred Stroppel's hilarious "A Sunday Drive," presented by Moxie Productions.

But the big star of the evening was the space. Off a substantial parking lot – free – is a spacious foyer and ticket desk suggesting a modern commercial theater. However, from there it's a circuitous trip through a maze of odd passages and rooms – suggesting a much more "off center" experience.

Then – voila! – you walk into a black box. With seating for 65 at one end and a moderate-sized stage at the other, the sight lines are all excellent. Despite no air conditioning yet, the ventilation kept the small theater moderately comfortable. And, for theater companies, use of the space will be affordable.

Off Center is the creation of four Burlington theater professionals – John D. Alexander, Stephen Goldberg, Generva MacPhail and Paul Schnabel – who have been seen in some of Vermont's more avant-garde theater adventures. They are renting what was a loading area for a bakery from Ben Bergstein, whose North End Studio is in the same complex. Wednesday's performances, hosted by Ben Aleshire, the festival's coordinator, were all short vignettes of larger productions. Bread and Puppet's Lubberland Dance Company in "Seven Gaza Dances," based on the recent Israeli attack on a supply flotilla attempting to help the embargoed Palestinians, made obvious but heart-wrenching points about the killings. Typical of Bread and Puppet, it caricatured the situation imaginatively with humor as well as pathos.

Campbell's "Flower Duet" is full of 21st-century angst, or, in truth, universal angst. Infidelity, social climbing and child hate all reared their ugly heads in Wednesday's delicious vignettes. Natalie Miller, Mia Adams and an unidentified male all read effectively in what promises to be a fascinating show.

No surprise, the sexual misadventures of a 20-year-old woman can be funny. Matt Trollinger and Jessie Stuart were hilarious as well as charming in UVM senior Julia DiFerdinando's "The Neurotic Female: A Brain Play." Directed by Edward Nagel, this tale of a sensitive young woman who slept with her Prince-Not-So-Charming before she got to know him felt authentic, convincing and very funny.

Holm was a riot in a cell-phone conversation while driving in "A Sunday Drive." Being dissed for dissing virtually everyone at a party the night before, Holm goes on with oblivious aplomb. It was fairly obvious humor, but well performed and terribly funny.

Off Center will host its first full-fledged theater production June 16-26 when it premieres Goldberg's "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee." Goldberg, whose surreal plays combine the underside of society and black humor with just a tincture of hope, hasn't been heard from in a while. Burlington's splendid new theater space should be the ideal place for his uniquely intriguing brand of theater.