

A New Theater Group Enters from the Phoenix's Wings

State of the Arts

BY **ERIK ESCKILSEN**

For actor **Mike DeSanto**, the show definitely must go on — even after a 25-year hiatus. It was 1985 when DeSanto, today co-owner of **Phoenix Books** in Essex, decided to trade a prolific and periodically self-sustaining acting career in the Washington, D.C., area for a more lucrative role as a lobbyist for the National Solid Wastes Management Association. “My kids needed new jeans,” he recalls. “I didn’t have any money. I realized this wasn’t working.”

Fast-forward a quarter century — and a move to Vermont and two bookstore ventures later — and DeSanto is poised to make a bold stage re-entrance as artistic director of the **Phoenix Theater Group** (PTG). The company will make its debut next month at Burlington’s **Off Center for the Dramatic Arts** with Edward

Albee’s *At Home at the Zoo*, a pairing of his *Homelife* and *The Zoo Story*. The latter is the playwright’s breakout one-act, which had its U.S. premiere in 1960; the former a prequel written in 2004. DeSanto will act alongside **Vivian Jordan** and **Adam Cunningham**, who will each direct a piece.

For DeSanto, who earned an MFA in theater directing from George Washington University in 1979, Albee’s play exemplifies the kind of work he thinks the local theater scene lacks these days — serious plays that hold a mirror up to audiences for a potentially discomfiting glimpse of their reflection. Under his direction, the PTG will mount plays that are “contemporary and speak to the world we live in today,” DeSanto says, “plays that mirror what I learned about Greek theater, that show citizens how they should live. I still think that’s what theater ought to be doing.”

Other plays that might fit the bill, he notes, are Annie Baker’s *Circle Mirror Transformation* and Sarah Ruhl’s *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* — as well as more Albee works. If this high-theater talk sounds lofty in such a soft economy, DeSanto says he’ll hedge his bets with small-cast plays that don’t require expensive production values. After *At Home at the Zoo*, his troupe will look to mount three shows a year for two years, and then take stock of the reception. Such frugality makes especially good financial sense when considering that DeSanto and his wife/business partner, **Renée Reiner**, hope to open a second Phoenix Books in downtown Burlington.

John D. Alexander, cofounder of the Off Center and an experienced theater actor and producer, welcomes DeSanto’s new company and agrees with his basic strategy. “I think there’s totally room for another production company that wants to put on shows,” Alexander says. “And I think they’ll add to the variety ... [But] because the audience draw is not a sure thing, even if it’s a great show with great press, putting a lot of money into production values is a risk.”

Alexander is less sanguine about DeSanto’s notion of creating a theatrical venue in the new, still-unspecified bookstore space. “At the theater venues in the area that I know of, all of the smaller stages ... have been experiencing unusually low turnout, and that’s because of the economy,” he says. “I don’t know how many performance spaces the area can bear.”

But balancing the books isn’t foremost in DeSanto’s thoughts as PTG prepares for curtain time. After picking up a role here and there over the past year or so, he’s bought into the maxim about what to do if you want something done right. Having his own “sandbox,” as DeSanto puts it, will enable him to produce the shows he wants, when he wants. What’s more, he hopes to open the PTG to staged readings and full productions of plays by local authors.

“Either the thing catches fire, or it doesn’t,” he says. “I just hope we can do it well enough so that other actors want to participate.”

"At Home at the Zoo," produced by the Phoenix Theater Group. Lisa Steele opens with "The Care and Feeding of Baby Birds." Wednesday through Saturday, December 7-10, 7:30 p.m., at Off Center for the Dramatic Arts, Burlington. \$10-15.

