

Warehouse gives play its 'vibe' -- and its name

By Dawn Baumgartner Vaughan : The Herald-Sun

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DURHAM -- Five people arrive at a warehouse to pick up their unclaimed property. It's the basis for the new both hands theatre



Bernard Thomas/ The Herald-Sun
the herald-sun | photos by bernard thomas Thaddaeus Edwards (from left), Beth Popelka, Laurie Wolf, Byron Jennings II and Lance Waycaster — all as Avery Liberty — rehearse the play “@ liberty” Wednesday at Greenfire Development’s Liberty Warehouse at 603 Rigsbee Ave. in downtown Durham.

company play, “@ liberty.” But unlike other plays, this production didn’t involve building a set. The set is an actual warehouse -- Liberty Warehouse in downtown Durham.

Both hands co-artistic directors Cheryl Chamblee and Tamara Kissane co-wrote the play for the space where it will be performed. It opens tonight. Liberty Warehouse is one of 31 downtown buildings owned by Greenfire Development, which is lending the space as part of its artist-in-residence program. Chamblee is Greenfire’s first artist-in-residence, in another Greenfire building, Baldwin Lofts.

Supporting the arts is an important component of downtown, said Michael Lemanski, managing partner of Greenfire. Lemanski, who serves on the board of the Durham Arts Council, added that a diverse downtown should include the creative energy that artists provide. Greenfire leases residential space to artists at 40 percent below market rates, he said, and has donated space to Chamblee in several downtown locations.

“Art and artists’ space will be an important part of our space forever downtown,” Lemanski said. “A program like this is a starting point for us -- creating opportunities for people to be creative.” He said Greenfire wants to demonstrate its commitment early and often.

“To foster that creativity drives the feeling of entrepreneurship,” Lemanski said. “It will get more people engaged in downtown.”

Even though “@ liberty” was specifically written for the space, it still presents some challenges like seating, lighting and sound. The play will be performed on the top floor. Other space in the Rigsbee Avenue building is occupied by a metal foundry, clay studio and the Scrap Exchange.

Liberty, once a tobacco warehouse, is not your normal theater space, Chamblee said. Besides being huge, it is full of chicken-wire storage bins filled with the belongings of businesses and individuals. Those things are the perfect props for the plot. The characters in “@ liberty” are trying to claim their own lives and exploring the idea of what each of our lives looks like. Life is made up of many, many, many moments, Chamblee said.

This production marks the 10th anniversary of both hands theatre, formed by Duke University graduates Chamblee and Kissane. The cast of “@ liberty” is an ensemble that has been training together for a year, including Beth Popelka, Byron Jennings II, Lance Waycaster, Laurie Wolf and Thaddaeus Edwards. Chamblee directs. Most of both hands’ shows have been held at Manbites Dog

Theater downtown, but it has used nontraditional space, too. Chamblee said they're always on the lookout for new spaces to perform downtown, and would consider using Liberty Warehouse again.

"Tamara and I both feel a great love for Durham," Chamblee said. "It has such a nice creative, gritty vibe to it. Downtown has so much potential, great spots and diversity of people. I hope it will continue to transform. We want to be in a creative, gritty environment."

Cast member Popelka said that "Cheryl and Tamara are two real sparkling gems of this community -- both as artists and as human beings. I believe they really contribute some beautiful shine to our collective treasure trove that is Durham."

She said having the play in Liberty Warehouse has been an incredible opportunity.

"As artists, it is interesting to explore unconventional spaces because stories live everywhere in the world. Plus, having performances there will give many people an opportunity to interact with a building that has been present in downtown Durham for years and years -- and they may drive by it every day but don't interact with it," Popelka said.

WHAT: "@ liberty" by both hands theatre company

WHEN: Today-Sunday; May 8-10

WHERE: Liberty Warehouse, 603 Rigsbee Ave., Durham

ADMISSION: Tickets are \$10-\$15. For more information about showtimes, visit www.myspace.com/bothhandstheatre or call 226-2002.

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