

DO YOU KNOW JACK?



Jack does some lobbying. Photo: Sam Horine

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There are many reasons for a company to stay itinerant in the theater world. Why sign a lease on a building when fundraising and finding the right audiences already present enough challenges? But Alec Duffy, artistic director of the Obie-Award winning company Hoi Polloi, is bucking the nomadic trend with Jack, a new performance venue in Clinton Hill whose inaugural production, Bertolt Brecht's *Baal*, runs July 12-August 5.

Frustrated with issues he saw in larger institutional theaters—such as stodgy programming and problematic methods of audience engagement—Duffy and his wife, Obie-award-winning set designer Mimi Lien, began dreaming about founding a theater that would increase people's access to the arts. "We wanted to present work that would reflect the diversity of New York City," says Duffy, "while also remaining adventurous in our artistic choices." Over the past few years, he and Lien witnessed an explosion of bars and restaurants in and around their Prospect Heights neighborhood. The only thing missing was a cultural outlet of the size that they were interested in founding.

The Jack space—located on Waverly Avenue in neighboring Clinton Hill—was originally built as a five-car garage in 1925. It most recently housed a DJ bar and lounge. “So far, the most interesting part has been seeing how the architecture of the building affects our relationship with the neighborhood,” Duffy observes. “Because we’re a storefront, we have people peeking in and walking by all the time.” With floor-to-ceiling windows providing easy views into the black-box space and bar, even a casual passerby can see what kind of projects are on tap. “It feels like an opportunity to connect the street with the art in a radical way,” says Duffy, “so that’s become our mission.”

Radical access to the arts may sound idealistic, but Duffy is no Pollyanna. He has surrounded himself with an interesting—and interdisciplinary—team of co-founders including Steve Leffue, Godfrey L. Simmons Jr., Nikaury Rodriguez, Prentice Onayemi, Ike Ufomadu, Amy Laird Webb, Jennifer Kidwell, and Andreea Mincic. “I wanted to put together a group that brings together different perspectives,” notes Duffy. Teaching artistry is a common thread among the founders, though, and they’re assembling a proposal for an arts curriculum to be taught in either schools or at Jack. (Full disclosure, in 2009 I acted in Hoi Polloi’s *The Less We Talk*.)

“The first year is a grand experiment,” Duffy declares. He and Lien have put seed money into Jack, named in honor of Duffy’s grandfather, but are praying that a summer fundraising campaign and a successful first season will ensure a longer life in Clinton Hill. Part of that grand experiment includes low-cost tickets and pay-what-you-can performances. Duffy is also keen on incorporating Clinton Hill residents into Jack’s programming and imagines a day-long open audition in August will result in a curated talent show, from which locals will be cast in future projects.

Starting a performance venue with Brecht’s *Baal*, a story about a self-destructive poet’s downfall, may seem quixotic. But Duffy, who has been garnering accolades with inventively immersive shows like *Shadows*, is steadfast in his enthusiasm and describes a unique performance experience in which audience members stand, as if at a club, during the show as the action unfolds around them. An electronic soundscape and a local taiko drummer compose a score that reverberates off aluminum foil-covered walls. “We’re creating a cave,” Duffy explains.

Beyond *Baal*, Duffy is unsure of how the first season will shape up but seems generally disinterested in safe choices—a John Cage or Sun Ra music festival are other ideas he’s been mulling over. Then again, he’s founded Jack without a mission statement, but with a question: “Can you create a space that has adventurous, cutting-edge art that also serves the surrounding community? We hope,” he says, “the answer is yes.”