

THE ELEPHANT ON THE CORNER

BY DIANE LEFER

PHOTOS: CHRIS KANE

WHILE THEATRE COMPANIES THROUGHOUT LA scramble to learn arts management and strategic planning to stay afloat in today's economic environment, Don Cesario and David Fofi, Producing Artistic Directors of the Elephant Theatre Company, readily admit they're clueless about fundraising, PR, marketing, branding, even basic budgeting.

"People ask what the budget was for a show," says Cesario. "What budget? We found money from within the business or it came out of our own pockets." The business is Elephant Stageworks, the income-generating entity through which they manage the four-theatre-plus-office-and-classroom complex that stretches around the Hollywood corner of Santa Monica Boulevard and Lillian Way, a business successful enough to finance 20 shows, mostly world premieres, and raise doubts

about their claims to ignorance.

Who are these guys?

The day we meet, Fofi—director, actor, producer, set designer, and self-proclaimed janitor—turns 40 and is about to sacrifice his moustache for a callback that requires him to be clean-shaven. (He booked.) He's enjoying the last weekends of the twice-extended run of *Los Muertos*, Timothy McNeil's unsparing drama for which Fofi won kudos for directing and was recognized along with Seth Chandler for the show's evocative and meticulously detailed production design.

Cesario, with equally varied talents and responsibilities, performed in the hit *7 Redneck Cheerleaders* and has just this morning learned the baby he and his wife are expecting will be a boy. (No name yet—"You have to meet them before you name them.")

They exude high-energy excitement along with a laid back cheerfulness which suggests they take their work—but not themselves—very seriously.

"We're not good with red tape," says Fofi. "We're more blue collar."

The two have been making theatre together since their days at Cal State-Long Beach. In 1995, Fofi and three other theatre arts graduates renovated a warehouse space off Main Street in the old Pabst Blue Ribbon Brewery in downtown LA and moved in. Pretty soon, they had sectioned off an area, built a



DAVID FOFI AND DON CESARIO

stage and gathered with other college friends, including Cesario, to create some seat-of-the-pants theatre.

"The tech booth was in a bedroom," Cesario recalls. "With a hole cut out in the wall," adds Fofi, "so you could see the theatre." The light board, still in their possession though no longer in use, was homemade of plywood, dimmer switches and extension cords.

"It was very utopianesque," says Cesario, "if there is such a word. We'd put up a show for just one weekend after hours of rehearsal and building great sets."

They didn't do a lot of advance planning. "We were ready to print the flyers for these Sam Shepard one-acts," Fofi says, "when we realized the company didn't have a name." Jacques Levy, who was directing one of the pieces, recounted an anecdote: Shepard was stymied when a scene he wanted to write seemed impossible to stage. He was told ...if you want an elephant to appear on the stage...just write it...and then see if there's a way to do it. And so the name Elephant off Main was born, along with great faith that, with imagination, problems can be solved.

The Shepard plays went up in July. "That's how smart we were," Fofi says. "It was 110 degrees and of course we had no air

additional overhead brings the monthly total to about \$17,000. Visiting productions, classes and workshops as well as co-productions—which can mean anything from a small discount in rental price to a project in which Elephant Theatre Company members have significant creative participation—bring in enough income to pay the bills and cover the costs of company shows.

"We never set out to be arts landlords," says Cesario, "but we take it very seriously. Even when we're onstage, we're always noticing what's going on inside the building. Other shows are going up and we need to treat them with respect."

Fofi recalls the time he was in costume, about to go on, and someone grabbed him to fix a toilet.

"It's challenging," they say in unison.

The upside of the challenge is that the Elephant Theatre Company can do plays the members love, eschewing surefire box office in favor of risky material and new works. The more than 60 members—actors, directors, playwrights, designers—pay no dues. Many are old friends from Long Beach; others arrive via referrals or just show up. "We don't advertise," says Fofi. "We don't hold auditions. It's about being part of the family."

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conditioning. My father suggested we get blocks of ice and set up fans to blow across. Two hours before curtain, I'm pulling slabs of ice off a loading dock."

It didn't occur to them to invite reviewers but the loft productions soon attracted attention and admiration of critics from *LA Weekly* and *Drama-Logue*. Elephant off Main was a success, "but we got tired of living there," says Fofi. "We wanted to grow up a little."

Cesario and Fofi decided to keep the Elephant going, joined initially by Gary Blumsack who went on to manage the Hudson Guild Theatre. The first adult lesson they learned was how much it costs to rent a venue. Deciding they needed a place of their own, in 1998 they signed a lease on an empty shell of a warehouse and transformed the space into the 99-seat Lillian Theatre with the help of friends "who could swing some hammers."

Over the years, the Lillian has remained the anchor while the scope of the theatre business operations expanded. Cesario and Fofi leased adjoining property and built the 70-seat Elephant Space and the 40-seat Elephant Lab. They briefly operated a jazz and blues club in the complex but, without a liquor license—that red-tape thing, again—it wasn't financially viable and so in 2003, they transformed the club to the 80-seat Elephant Asylum. The venues connect within a single building structure but each has a separate entrance and box office. Not to mention real lights, real seats, real A/C.

Rent on the complex costs \$14,000 per month while

While the prevailing company attitude remains, well, "utopianesque," the business is becoming more businesslike as members of the creative family step up to the plate.

"We never asked for help before," Cesario says. "Maybe it's a guy thing." Now playwright Tony Foster is on the committee to coordinate volunteers. Lindsay Allbaugh, who works her creative chops as a director, has taken on the role of Director of Project Development. "She's freed us up to do more of the fun stuff." The theatre company just got not-for-profit status. "For the first time," says Fofi, "we have fundraising instead of my and Don's credit cards."

They have plans—maybe open a café where audience members can hang out after a show—and remain open to whatever challenges may come.

Cesario and Fofi have watched other small theatres lose their homes as real estate values rise. Their own lease is guaranteed through 2009. Given their good relationship with the landlord, they hope to extend. If not? "We started out living in our theatre," says Fofi. "Maybe we'll end up like that again."

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