

Ars Nova steps up with full slate Venue to function as a true nonprofit theater

by Mark Blankenship

NEW YORK -- After five years and hundreds of shows, Ars Nova is finally ready to produce a season.

This month marks the first time the New York venue -- known for its diverse slate of comedy, music and legit programming -- will function as a true nonprofit theater, complete with mainstage shows, development programs and a co-production with a major company. Staffers hope traction with young auds and a past as a presenting house will give the troupe a unique profile in Gotham's busy entertainment scene.

"This transition hasn't been about, 'How do we become another nonprofit theater company?' " says artistic director Jason Eagan. "It's been, 'How do we apply what we're already doing to a nonprofit model?'"

Ars Nova's chief goal is giving emerging artists the chance to be heard. This season, concurrent with the calendar year, headlines almost entirely unknown or underground talent. In March, for instance, the company mounts tyro scribe Peter Nachtrieb's dark comedy, "Boom," staged by in-demand downtown helmer Alex Timbers.

A few weeks later, it teams with Manhattan Theater Club to co-produce "From Up Here," by first-time playwright Liz Flahive.

A raft of fresh artists arrives every week. Mondays feature readings from the theater's play development group and other special events -- including a show from monologist Mike Daisey -- while Tuesdays alternate between "Uncharted," a platform for rising musicians, and "Tragedy Tomorrow," a comedy series that includes everything from sketch revues to raucous cabaret, such as the suggestively named *Two Girls for Five Bucks*.

In one sense, this is how it's always been for Ars Nova. Ever since 2003, when it was founded as a for-profit performance space, the venue has juggled a busy schedule of off-kilter shows, and its programming expanded when it became nonprofit in 2005.

These models brought notable success, including the 2006 run of Judy Gold's solo show "25 Questions for a Jewish Mother" and last year's "At Least It's Pink," a burlesque cabaret co-written by "Sex and the City's" Michael



Photo by Trevor Oswalt.

Ars Nova composer-in-residence Joe Iconis performs at the theater

Patrick King that's rumored for a commercial run this year.

That presenting-focused model also projected an image of experimentation, since acts would often get booked with little advance notice. "Our audiences got excited by the fact we were constantly offering them something unexpected," Eagan says.

But 11th-hour scheduling meant Ars Nova couldn't provide much hands-on artistic development.

"We had a lot of creative ambitions, things we wanted to do simultaneously," says general manager Andrew Kircher. "But that wasn't realistic when we were just taking things as they came."

With a fixed season and an increased staff of 10, the theater is better able to apportion its resources. And artists-in-residence now attend weekly meetings and are expected to scout emerging talent.

But while this increased stability makes it easier to develop more work, there is concern about blurring the theater's image. "Our biggest struggle is how to keep growing while maintaining our shoot-from-the-hip energy," says Kircher.

This season has been built with a certain flexibility. Even though dates have been set for the Tuesday night shows and an upcoming fall festival, performers are still being recruited.

Patrons can buy tickets without knowing exactly what they'll see.

"We want to develop a strong identity overall," says Emily Shooltz, director of artistic development. "We want to be a place where people can say, 'I'll go see something there, even if it isn't usually my cup of tea,' because they trust the aesthetic eye that goes into our programming."

Ideally, this firm-but-flexible template will also appeal to artists, who can get support on a project without booking it seasons in advance.

The new model provides economic incentives, too. Previously, Ars Nova's visiting artists also had to double as producers. They supplied much of their own marketing, and their only payment came from a split of ticket sales.

"Now we've put the performer in the position of a performer," Eagan says. This season, Ars Nova will assume responsibility for marketing and promotion, and every performer, even those appearing in a one-off show, will be paid.

This won't be cheap. Last year's comedy nights, for instance, tended to be low-fi affairs that cost the theater roughly \$1,000 each. Now they're being treated like mini-

productions, budgeted between \$5,000-\$6,000.

Add that to the October festival and ambitious productions like "Jollyship the Whiz-Bang," a "pirate-puppet-rock spectacular" slated for May, and the \$1.5 million annual budget almost sounds anemic.

However, Kircher says the theater's funds are adequate, despite ticket sales accounting for less than 20% of the budget. Ars Nova holds only 99 people, and to attract young auds, tickets are kept at \$20 or below. Otherwise the theater relies on grants, individual donations and government support.

Staffers acknowledge that their ambitions are pushing their resources to the limit -- "We have huge aspirations," says Shooltz, "but this is definitely a test year."