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HITTING THE ROAD: Grove Theater Center founders Charles Johanson, left, and Kevin Cochran examine a model of the movable theater for their new company.

Have stage, will travel

Grove Theater Center plans to leave Garden Grove and make the road its permanent home.

By PAUL HODGINS

Since 1994, Charles Johanson and Kevin Cochran have run a plucky theater company, Grove Theater Center, in Garden Grove. From the beginning, programming a winning season in two municipally owned stages was an against-the-odds endeavor. Often, critically acclaimed shows would play to mostly empty houses. But over the decade,

Johanson and Cochran managed to present ambitious theater that included some world premieres and offbeat shows together with Shakespeare and American classics.

In recent years, Johanson and Cochran have diversified their geographical base, fielding seasons in Fullerton and, more recently, Burbank;

in the past year, their presence in Garden Grove waned almost completely.

Last week, the pair announced an ambitious plan to expand their reach even more. If their vision comes to fruition, GTC will become an itinerant company beginning in the 2007-08 season. Retaining its logo and initials, it will change its name to the Grid Theater Company. Cochran and Johanson intend to present a six-show season of rotating repertory in at least two and as many as four different Southern California communities. The Grid will travel with its own self-contained stage and an ingeniously designed 152-seat venue whose 55-by-80-foot dimensions fit perfectly within a gymnasium or basketball court.

"We felt it was the perfect time to try something like this," Cochran said. "We have a good knowledge of how cities plan and budget, and we know how expensive it is for communities to own and operate their own theaters. We think this will offer a very attractive alternative."

GTC will end its long association with the city of Garden Grove when its management contract for the city's 172-seat Gem Theater ends June 30. After that, its directors will concentrate on mounting shows in a city-owned theater in Burbank's Izay Park while they raise funds and plan the Grid project.

"We loved bringing theater to that part of Orange County," Johanson said. "But we've been much more successful in attracting audiences to see the plays we like to produce in Burbank. We've looked pretty closely at the changing demographic patterns in Garden Grove, and we've concluded it's just not the right place to do the kind of theater we want to do."

In the meantime, GTC will continue to present a limited season in Garden Grove. The company's Ovation Award-winning new show,

"Blake ... Da Musical!" will play there for a limited run in December. The winning entries in the New Play Initiative will be presented early next year.

Cochran and Johanson acknowledged that funding hasn't been secured yet for their traveling theater; they haven't yet presented their proposal to any cities. But they said the cost analysis looks promising for their project.

"If we play in three cities and get 70 percent (of capacity), we'll have a \$1.5 million budget and a surplus of about \$130,000," Johanson said.

Ideally, the Grid would expand to at least four residencies per season and a 250-seat theater. Plans include six audience and stage configurations.

Permanent-venue theater is also in GTC's future; it has just signed a contract with the city of Burbank to manage its theater through 2010. But Cochran and Johanson don't want to abandon Orange County completely. "We plan to look for administrative space here," Cochran said.

And since Equity contracts for actors stipulate accommodation must be paid outside a 50-mile radius of Los Angeles, north and central Orange County would fall within their new company's boundaries.

"We think there are a lot of communities in Orange County that could really benefit from this," Johanson said. "Considering what we're bringing into the community and the economic activity we'd generate, there's no downside when you compare us to paying for a permanent theater and a company to manage it. We're offering professional theater at a bargain rate."

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