

Cleveland Public Theatre completes purchase of former church buildings

By Julie Washington, The Plain Dealer

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Peggy Turbett/The Plain Dealer

Actors Holly Holsinger, left, and Chris Seibert rehearse a movement exercise in the nave of a former church now owned by Cleveland Public Theatre. Holsinger and Seibert, along with director Karin Randoja, are creating "Insomnia Project," a play inspired by the writings of Anais Nin. CPT recently purchased the church, hall and parsonage to use for rehearsals and theater classes.

When **Cleveland Public Theatre's** board said no to then-executive director James Levin's desire to buy three nearby buildings for the theater's use, the matter could have died right there.

But Levin felt the purchase was critical for CPT's growth and the preservation of the neighborhood. He purchased the buildings -- a former church, parish hall and parsonage-- himself and leased them to CPT until the day when the theater could afford to buy them.

That day arrived in December, when CPT paid its final installment on the \$410,000 lease-purchase agreement, according to county records.

"This is an enormous milestone for the theater," said Denis Griesmer, general manager of CPT.

The move is another step in the transformation of the Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood into a thriving arts community. The church properties, at 6203 Detroit Ave., are a few blocks east of Gordon Square Theater, home of CPT and a linchpin of the arts district.

At a time when many arts organizations are struggling to stay afloat financially, CPT was able to complete the deal thanks to its participation in, and funding from, the Gordon Square Arts District, said the district's executive director Joy Roller. The district -- a collaboration of CPT, the Near West Theater and the Detroit Shoreway Community Development Corp. -- raises economic-development funds to revitalize that neighborhood, Roller said.



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A former Romanian Orthodox church on Cleveland's Detroit Avenue, blocks from Cleveland Public Theatre's Gordon Square Theatre, has become part of CPT's campus. The Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood is undergoing a renaissance as an arts district.

CPT has leased the buildings from Levin since 2007 and uses them for rehearsals and theater classes, Griesmer said.

The church building, believed to date to the late 1800s, used to be a Romanian Orthodox facility before it was sold to a Russian Orthodox congregation. In 2003, Levin formed a limited-liability partnership called Vine Court Properties and used it to buy the seldom-used buildings for \$275,000. He spent about \$125,000 to renovate bathrooms, update heating and electrical systems, replace exterior doors and make other improvements to the church and hall, he said.

The parsonage suffered a fire in the 1970s and is not functional.

Levin, who also is founding artistic director of Ingenuityfest, envisioned using the property for music and theater performances. It was the site of a world music festival he organized and a record-production studio.

Levin said he has mixed feelings about giving up a tie to a neighborhood he's been a part of for decades, but he's glad his plan reached fruition.

"It was supposed to be part of CPT's campus, and now it is," he said.