

Datebook

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Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

Laborers work to remove the mezzanine at Club Fugazi, which will allow more room for aerial stunts when a new circus show begins performances at the North Beach venue this fall. The new layout will seat 360 patrons.

Club Fugazi poised for circus makeover

Former 'Beach Blanket Babylon' venue set for new show in fall

By Lily Janiak

The next show in Club Fugazi, the North Beach venue best known as the longtime host of “Beach Blanket Babylon,” is going to be a circus produced by new company Club Fugazi Experiences, organizers announced Wednesday.

The show, whose title remains to be announced, is slated to begin performances this fall. Its artistic directors, Bay Area natives Gypsy Snider and Shana Carroll, hail from the 7 Fingers, the Montreal circus collective.

Snider (daughter of Pickle Family Circus co-founders Peggy Snider and Larry Pisoni) and Carroll (daughter of former Chronicle columnist Jon Carroll) plan to make the show a love letter to San Francisco for both tourists and locals, one that’s ongoing, playing seven performances per week, but that evolves so often as to merit revisits.

If that description evokes “Beach Blanket,” the similarities end there, the pair say. Snider likens their storytelling mode to “a Picasso series of images.”

“San Francisco is such a wonderful city of tensions, of exploding and then imploding, and contradictions and meetings of minds,” she says. “We’ve been going through the history, from pre-colonized to now, and tried to capture through images exactly that tension and find a way for the audience to love that tension.”



Studio Pastis / The 7 Fingers

Performers from the 7 Fingers’ “Séquence 8.”

Among the show’s inaugural acts are the juggler and contortionist Natasha Patterson; the dancer-acrobat-musician Isabella Diaz; the hoop diver and pole artist Melvin Diggs; and Jeremi Levesque, who specializes in the Korean plank.

While some might think “Beach Blanket” is a tough act to follow, Snider shrugs it off.

“This is the thing that worries me

the least,” she says. “‘Beach Blanket’ was so iconic and so absolutely itself and so unapologetic for being itself. If there’s anything as an artist that I want to learn from, it’s that.”

David Dower, founder of Z Space, is returning to the Bay Area from Boston to serve as Club Fugazi Experiences’ co-producer and executive director, which before the show opens involves overseeing \$2.5 million of construction in the venue.

The company is adding some give to the stage floor, to help absorb the landings of tumblers; installing six or seven rigging points to the ceiling, so that performers can hang safely; and removing the mezzanine, to allow more room for aerial stunts.

It’s keeping the side balconies as well as the Grand Tiara, the seats in the very back of the second level, which were built for Queen Elizabeth when she visited “Beach Blanket” in 1983.

Club Fugazi Experiences plans to serve food and drink from local purveyors, with the consultation of Audie Golder of Jardinière and Vito Passero of the slow food movement.

Audiences are to be seated at cabaret tables — including some on the stage itself — but in chairs that swivel in a full circle, to allow for gazing at stunts overhead and to the rear. The new layout seats 360 patrons, in contrast to the 393 of “Beach Blanket.”

Fugazi continues on D6

Troupe to move into S.F. venue

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Dower is running Club Fugazi Experiences as a for-profit, with construction funding coming from investors.

“‘Beach Blanket’ ran for 45 years without public subsidy,” he says. “This community is already overstretched in terms of its philanthropic resources for arts and culture. If we were coming in here and making another demand on that, then shame on us.”

For him, Club Fugazi Experiences has a civic responsibility to help revitalize North Beach, a San Francisco neighborhood plagued in recent years by vacant storefronts.

“If this were a straight-up business decision, we would have gone to the Mission or some other place. But when you’re thinking about opportunity and responsibility and home, you want to be a problem solver, a contribution,” he says.

For Cooper and Carroll, performing in San Francisco has been a longtime dream. When the 7 Fingers was created, in 2002, the goal was to be bicoastal. Some of the collective’s shows toured through the Bay Area in early years, but over time logistics became untenable.

When “Beach Blanket” announced plans to close, Eric Eislund, who would later become Club Fugazi Experiences’ co-producer and general manager, approached his neighbor, “Beach Blanket” performer Curt Branom, to express condolences and ask about plans for Club Fugazi. Learning that a future tenant hadn’t been named, Eislund and Snider went to visit Club Fugazi that day to assess its possibilities.

The team appreciated the space’s history — it’s hosted Beat poets, Thelo-



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David Dower is the co-producer of Club Fugazi Experiences.

nious Monk and the Grateful Dead, in addition to “Beach Blanket” — as well as its theatricality and intimacy.

“A circus becomes so much more explosive when it’s in a compressed space,” says Snider. “It just takes every inch of the real estate.”

“They wanted to get to a place where people could see the performers, know them by the end of the night, feel something for them, so that as this death-defying thing is happening, you’re actually thinking about the person,” adds Dower, who points to the fact that part of the 7 Fingers’ aesthetic is that acrobats are not anonymous stuntmen.

Branom, who performed with “Beach Blanket” for 25 years, playing a pink-wigged King Louis XIV among other characters, feels no resentment about having a new tenant in his longtime venue.

“As sad as it was to say goodbye after 25 years of an amazing run for me, it made it worse to think of this beautiful, living, breathing building sitting idle and deteriorating,” Branom says. “I just had this ‘Grey Gardens’ vision of it, thinking, ‘That’s not what any of us wanted.’ I definitely had mixed feelings at the beginning; then I realized this is exactly what this space is all about: bringing a community together to create and inspire and surprise and have fun and laugh.”

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